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by ROE RICHMOND

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MAX BRAND'S **Western** Magazine

No. 4 British Edition

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*Gunslick Lefty Cornwall was tough enough to spit in a wildcat's eye, but the whole town of Appleton waited to see if he could face . . .*

# THE LAUGHTER OF SLIM MALONE

**By Max Brand**

*Slim paused, bottle in hand*

TIME has little to do with reputation in the Far West, and accordingly the name of Slim Malone grew old in the region of Appleton, and yet the owner of the name was still young.

Appleton was somewhat of a misnomer, for the region had never known anything save imported apples or any other sort of fruit since the time of its birth into the history of whisky and revolvers. But a misguided pioneer in the old days had raised a few scrubby trees and had named the town forever. The dreams of the early agriculturalists had died long ago, but the name remained to pique the curiosity of travelers and furnish jokes for inhabitants.

In the old days, when Appleton was a name rather than a fact, the hilarity had been as absent as the men but after gold was discovered in the three gorges which led from the settlement into the heart of the mountains, the little town became a rendezvous of a thousand adventurers. The stages to and from the railroad thirty miles away, were crowded with men eager to face the hardships of the climate and the great adventure of the gold fields.

It was then that Slim Malone appeared. It was said that he had first come upon the scene as the owner of the Red River strike, which was finally owned by Sandy Gleason. It was further rumored that Sandy had beaten Slim Malone out of the claim by a very shady deal at cards; but Sandy refused to discuss the matter, and Slim Malone was rarely within vocal range, so the matter had never been sifted. Sandy was rarely more vocal than a grunt, and when Slim Malone appeared people had generally other things to think about than questions concerning his past.

A certain percentage of lawlessness is taken for granted in a mining town. People are too busy with their own concerns to pay attention to their neighbors, but when three stages in succession, passing from Appleton to Concord, the nearest railroad station, were robbed by a rider on a white horse, the community awoke and waxed wrath. The loss was too much in common to be passed over.

The first effort was an impromptu organization of half a dozen angered miners who rode into the Weston Hills. They found fresh hoof-prints after an hour of riding, and went on greatly encouraged, with the pistols loosened in their holsters. After some hours of hard travel they came upon a white horse in the midst of a hollow, and then spread into a circle and approached cautiously. But not cautiously enough. While they were still far from the white horse the bandit opened fire upon them from the shelter of a circle of rocks. They rode into town the next day with three of their number badly hurt and the other three marked for life. That started the war.

As the months passed posse after posse left Appleton and started to scour the Weston Hills for the marauder. The luckiest of the expeditions came back telling tales of a sudden fusillade from an unexpected covert, and then a swift white horse scouring into the distance. The majority came back with no tales at all save of silent mountains and the grim cactus of the desert.

In the meantime the stages from Appleton to Concord were held up with a monotonous regularity by a rider of a fleet white horse.

Then the new mayor came to Appleton. He owned three claims on Askwarthy Gulch, and he ran on the double platform of no license for the Appleton saloons and the end of Slim Malone. His name was Orval Kendricks, but that didn't count. What mattered was his red hair and the statements of his platform. Slim Malone celebrated the new reign by holding up two stages within the first five days.

But the new mayor lived up to the color of his hair, and proved worthy of his platform. He held a meeting of every able-bodied citizen in town three days after his inauguration, and in his speech the men noted with relief that he forgot to mention the saloons, and that he concentrated his attention on Slim Malone.

AFTER a carefully-prepared peroration, he built up to his climax by the proposal that the community import "Lefty" Cornwall, at a salary of five hundred dollars a month and five thousand bonus, to act as deputy sheriff until the apprehension of Slim Malone. Then

the crowd applauded for they were equal to any measures for Slim Malone's suppression even if it meant the importation of Lefty Cornwall.

The fame of Lefty had begun in Texas when he mortally wounded one greaser and crippled two others in a saloon fight. Since then it had increased and spread until he was a household word even farther north than Appleton. He came from that sunburned southland where a man's prowess was gaged by his speed and dexterity with his "irons," and even on that northern plateau of Appleton men knew that to cross Lefty Cornwall was death or murderous mutilation.

Appleton decreed the day of the arrival of the new sheriff a festival occasion. The farmers from the adjoining table-land drove into town, the miners from the three valleys rode down. And when the stage arrived from Concord the incipient sheriff dismounted in the midst of a huge crowd, and cheers which shook the sign-board of Sandy Orton's saloon.

Now the mayor of Appleton had declared deathless war against the saloons in his platform, but since his election he had been strangely silent upon the liquor question. He was as canny as his red hair suggested, and he had a truly Scotch insight into the crucial moments of life. He perceived the arrival of Lefty Cornwall to be such a moment, and he perceived at the same time the correct way of meeting that crisis.

It was with surprise no less than pleasure that the throng heard the lusty voice of their chief official inviting them to Sandy Orton's saloon, and where they were in doubt, his beckoning arm put them right. They filled the saloon from bar to door, and those who could not enter thronged at the entrances with gaping mouths.

The sheriff was equal to the occasion. He mounted the bar much as a plainsman mounts a horse, and standing in full view of his fellow citizens, he invited Lefty Cornwall to join him in his prominent position. Nowise loath, Lefty swung the bar in the most approved fashion, and stood, locked arm in arm with the dignified official of Appleton. In the meantime the bartenders, thrilled equaly with surprise and pleasure, passed out the drinks to the crowded room. It was apparently a moment big in portent to Appleton, and not a heart there but pulsed big with pride in their mayor.

"Fellow citizens," began the mayor, raising a large freckled hand for silence.

A hush fell upon the assemblage.

"Boys," began Orval Kendricks again. "this here is a solemn occasion. I feel called upon to summon the manhood of this here town to listen to my words, and I reckon that most of the manhood of the town is within hearin'."

A chorus of assent followed.

"I don't need any Daniel Webster to tell you men that this here town is hard hit," continued Mayor Kendricks. "It don't need no Henry Clay to tell you that these diggin's are about to bust up unless we have the right sort of a strong arm man in town. We've been sufferin' patiently from the aggressions of a red-handed desperado who I don't need to mention, because his name just naturally burns my tongue."

"Slim Malone!" cried a dozen voices. "We're followin' you, chief!"

The Mayor thrust his hand into his breast and extended the other arm in imitation of a popular wood-cut of Patrick Henry.

"There may be some of you guys," cried the mayor, rising to the emotion of the moment, "there may be some of you guys who don't know the man I mean, but I reckon that a tolerable pile of Appleton's best citizens spend a large part of their time cursing Slim Malone."

"We ain't through damning him yet," yelled a voice, and the crowd voiced their assent, half in growls and half in laughter.

"He has tricked our posses as an honest man would be ashamed to do," went on the mayor, warming to his oration, "and he has shot our citizens, and he has swiped our gold! I'm askin' you as man to man, can a self-respectin' community stand for this? It can't. What's the answer that Appleton makes to this desperado?"

He paused and frowned the audience into a state of suspense.

"There is only one answer to this gun-fighter, and that answer stands at my right hand," bellowed the mayor, when he judged that the silence had sunk into his hearers sufficiently. "The name of the answer is Lefty Cornwall!"

THE following burst of applause brought a momentary blush into even Lefty's cheek. At the reiterated demands for a speech he hitched at his revolver in its skeleton holster, removed his sombrero, and mopped his forehead with a ponderous hand. When it became evident that the hero was about to break into utterance the crowd became silent.

"Fellows," began the gun-fighter, "makin' speeches ain't much in my line."

"Makin' dead men is more your game," broke in the wit of the assemblage.

A universal hiss attested that the crowd was anxious to hear the Texan gunman out.

"But if you are goin' to do me the honor of makin' me sheriff of this here county and this here city of Appleton," he continued, letting his eye rove down Appleton's one street, "I'm here to state that law and order is goin' to be maintained here at all costs. Right here I got to state that the only costs I'm referrin' to is the price of the powder and lead for this here cannon of mine."

The crowd broke in upon the speech with noisy appreciation, and many cries of "That's the stuff, old boy!"

"I been hearin' a tolerable pile about one Slim Malone," went on the new sheriff.

"So have we," broke in the irrepressible wit of the assemblage, only to be choked into silence by more serious-minded neighbors.

"Sure," agreed the sheriff. "I reckon you've heard a lot too much about him. But I'm here to state that all this talk about Slim Malone has got to stop, and has got to stop sudden. I'm here to stop it."

He hitched his holster a little forward again as he spoke and a deep silence fell upon the crowd.

"Fellow citizens," he continued, spitting liberally over the side of the bar, "whatever gun-play is carried on around here in the future is to be done strictly by me, and all you men can consider yourselves under warning to leave your shootin' irons at home, unless you want to use them to dig premature graves."

This advice was received with an ironical chuckle of appreciation from the crowd.

"As for Slim Malone," he went on, "I'm goin' out into the Weston Hills to get him single-handed. I don't want no posse. I'll get him single-handed or bust, you can lay to that; and if I come back to this town without Slim Malone, alive or dead, you can say that Malone has the Indian sign on me."

Having finished all that he had to say, Lefty felt about in his mind to find a graceful maner of closing his exordium, when the mayor came to his assistance. He recognized that nervous clearing of the throat and wandering of the eyes out of his own first political experiences. Now, he raised his glass of colored alcohol and water, which in Appleton rejoiced in the name of Bourbon.

"Boys," he shouted, "there ain't no better way of showin' our appreciation of our new sheriff than by turnin' bottoms up. Let's go!"

The next thing was to find a proper mount. This proved a more difficult task. The sheriff knew horses from nose to hoof, and he was hard to please. At last he selected a tall roan with a wicked eye and flat shoulders which promised speed. These preparations made, he swung to the saddle, waved his hand to the crowd, and galloped out of town.

It was complete night before he reached the upper end of Eagle Head Canyon, and he was weary from the stumbling gait of his horse over the rocks.

Lefty was a very brave man, but like

almost all of the physically courageous, he dreaded derision more than actual pain. Yet, in spite of this he finally decided that it was better to go back to the town and face the smiles than to remain through the cold night in these dread silences. As it was he felt that it was no use to hunt further, and he started back down the canyon. He had not gone far when his horse stumbled and commenced to limp.

Lefty got off with a curse and felt of the forehoofs. The difficulty proved to be a sharp, three-cornered rock which had been picked up under the shoe of the left fore foot. He was bending over to pry this loose between his fingers when he caught the glint of a light.

In his excitement he sprang upright and stared. At once the light disappeared. Lefty began to feel ghostly. His senses had never played him such tricks before.

He leaned over and commenced work on the stone again, but as he did so his eye caught the same glint of light. There was no possible mistake about it this time. He remained bent over and stared at it until he was certain that he saw a yellow spot of light, a long, thin ray which pointed out to him like a finger through the shadows.

But this time he took the bearings of the light carefully, and when he stood up he was able to locate it again.

He threw the reins over his horse's head and commenced to stalk the light carefully. Sometimes as he slipped and stumbled over the rocks he lost sight of it altogether, only to have it reappear when he had almost given up hopes of finding it again. And so he came upon the cave.

The light shone through a little chink between two tall boulders, and as Lefty pressed his eye to the aperture, holding his breath as he did so, he saw a long dugout, perhaps a dozen paces from end to end, and some five paces wide. Behind a partition at one end he heard the stamping of a horse, and as Lefty gazed a magnificent white head rose behind the partition and looked fairly at him.

At first he saw no other occupant of the place, but by moving his eye to one side of the aperture he managed to get a glimpse of the bandit himself. There was no question about his identity. From the descriptions which he had heard while in Appleton, he knew him at once, the expressionless gray eyes, and the thin, refined face.

He sat tilted back in a heavy chair smoking a pipe and reading, and Lefty saw that he sat facing a blanket at the far end of the room. Evidently this was the entrance. So far as Lefty could see the bandit was unarmed, his two long guns lying on the table half a dozen paces away.

Very softly he crept along the side of the boulder, and finally came to an aperture, as he had expected. It was just wide enough for a man to press through, and from the chisel marks at his sides it had evidently been artificially widened from time to time. At the end of the narrow passage hung the blanket.

If Lefty had proceeded cautiously up to this point, his caution now became almost animal-like. Behind that blanket he had no idea what was happening. Perhaps the bandit had heard a noise long before, and was now crouched against the wall in another part of the place, ready to open fire at the first stir of the blanket. Perhaps he had stolen out of the cave by another entrance and was now hunting the hunter. The thought sent a chill down Lefty's back and he turned his head quickly. Then he resumed his slow progress. At the very edge of the blanket he paused for a long and deathly minute.

He swung the blanket aside and crouched in the entrance with his gun leveled. The little round sight framed the face of Slim Malone, who still sat reading quietly.

"Hands up!" said Lefty, softly.

Even then, with his bead on his man, he did not feel entirely sure of himself.

The meaningless gray eyes raised calmly from the book. It seemed to Lefty that a

yellow glint came into them for a moment like the light that comes into an animal's eyes when it is angered, but the next moment it was gone, and he could not be sure that it had come there at all. The rest of the face was perfectly calm. Malone lowered the book slowly and then raised his hands above his head.

"Ah, Sheriff," he said quietly, "I see that you have arrived at last."

"Right-o," said Lefty, "I'm here all right."

He felt strangely relieved after hearing his quarry speak. He stepped through the entrance and straightened up, still with the revolver leveled.

"In order to remove any strain you may be under," went on Slim Malone, "I'll assure you that I am quite unarmed. My guns are both lying on the table there. In order that you may make sure, I shall stand up, with my hands over my head, and turn around slowly. You can examine me to your own satisfaction."

He did as he had said, and Lefty's practised eyes saw that there was not the suspicion of a lump under the clothes.

"Now," said Slim Malone, as he faced his captor again, and his smile was strangely winning. "I hope that I may lower my arms and we can commence our little party."

"Your end of this here party is all over, my beauty," said Lefty grimly, "except that the boys at Appleton may give you a little impromptu reception when we hit town."

"So I understand," smiled Slim Malone. "I have no doubt they will be glad to see me."

"Ain't no doubt in the world," grinned Lefty, warming to the perfect calm of this man. "Between you an' me, pal, I'm sorry to have to turn this little trick; but—"

Malone waved a careless and reassuring hand.

"Business is business, my dear fellow," he said.

"That bein' the case," said Lefty, "I'll have to ask you to turn around and put your hands behind your back while I put these here bracelets on. I don't want to discourage you any, but while I'm doin' it this here gun will be in my hand and pointin' at your back."

"Naturally," nodded Malone; "quite right, of course; but before we start on our little jaunt back to the camp won't you have a drink with me? I have some really rare old stuff here."

Lefty grinned appreciatively.

"It's a good move, pal," he said, shaking his head with admiration, "an' I know that you're hard put to it or you wouldn't try such an old dodge on me. It's a good move, but down in Texas the booze stunt is so old that they've almost forgotten it —not quite!"

"Ah," said Malone, with a little sigh of regret, "then I suppose we shall have to ride out in the night without a nip. Gets mighty chilly here before morning, you know."

But this fact had gradually dawned on Lefty during his ride up the valley, and as he looked forward to the journey back he shivered with unpleasant anticipation.

"I suppose the booze is the real thing?" he inquired casually.

"There are little bubbles under the glass," said Slim Malone with subtle emotion.

Lefty Cornwall sighed deeply. The taste of the Appleton bar whisky still burned his mouth. After all this fellow was a man. He might be a criminal, but Lefty's own past was not free from shady episodes. Furthermore, he was about to make five thousand dollars on presenting him to the good people of Appleton.

"If you sure want a drink before we start, go ahead," said Lefty.

"The bottle and a glass is over there in that little dugout on the wall," pointed Malone.

In the little open hutch on the wall the sheriff perceived a tall bottle which shimmered pleasantly in the torch-light.

"Go ahead," said the sheriff, "I reckon you know I'm watchin' all the time."

"Surely," said Malone pleasantly. "I know you're on your job all the time."

He walked over to the hutch and picked up the bottle and the glass. He paused with the bottle tucked away under his arm.

"Queer thing," pondered Malone, "the same pack that held this bottle of whisky held this also."

Lefty tightened his grip on the gun as Malone reached deeper into the hutch, but he straightened again and appeared carrying a large concert banjo.

"That fellow had taste," he continued, crossing the room and laying the banjo carelessly on the chair; "just run your eyes over that banjo."

"Some banjo, all right," said the sheriff, "but hurry up with your drink, Malone. We've got to be on our way."

Malone uncorked the bottle and held it under his nose.

"The old aroma, all right," he pronounced. "You won't join me?"

Now the heart of the sheriff was a human heart, but his will was adamant.

"Not me, Malone," he answered. "I've been in the game too long. Can't drink on this sort of a job."

"Guess you're right," murmured Malone, letting the amber stream trickle slowly into the glass; "but it's too bad."

He raised the glass to his lips and swallowed half of the contents slowly.

"It looks like the real thing," the sheriff said judicially.

"It is," pronounced Malone with decision.

The sheriff shuddered with sympathy.

"I reckon," he said hesitatingly, "that you might pour me just a drop."

It seemed to him that as he spoke the yellow glint came into the eyes of Malone again, but a moment later it was gone, and he decided that the change had been merely a shadow from the wavering torch-light. He took the glass which Malone extended to him under the cover of the pointed gun and raised it slowly to his lips.

"Just stand a bit further back while I drink, pal," he said.

Malone obeyed, and the sheriff tilted the glass. It was, as Malone had said, "the real old aroma," and the sheriff drew a deep breath.

"I reckon it ain't quite as old as you say," said the sheriff, feeling his way cautiously. "I reckon it ain't more than fifteen years old at the outside."

Malone paused, with the bottle suspended over the glass to consider.

"I thought that myself when I first drank," he nodded "but that was before I got used to it."

The sheriff was inclined to agree. He also felt sure that one more drink would quite banish from his memory the taste of that one drink in Appleton. Moreover, the danger, if there was any, was slight, for Malone was taking drink for drink with him, and larger drinks at that. It was a sort of subtle challenge to the manhood of the sheriff, and he was as proud of his capacity for whisky as of his speed with a gun.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the sheriff indicated the banjo with a careless wave of the pistol.

"Play any?" he inquired, "or do you keep it around as sort of an ornament?"

"Both," smiled Malone. "It makes the place more homelike, you know, and then I sing once in a while, but not often."

"I'm a pretty good judge," stated the sheriff; "blaze away, and I'll see you ain't interrupted. Been a long time since I had the pleasure."

He was, as he said, a fairly good judge, and he was delighted with the rich baritone which rang through the cave. After a time, as the whisky and music melted into his mood, he began to call for old favorites, darky ballads, and last of all, for the sentimental ditties which have always charmed the heart of the rough men of the West.

As he sang, the bandit commenced, naturally, to walk back and forth through the cave, and the sheriff sat back in the chair and with half-closed eyes waved the revolver back and forth in time. He failed

to note that as Malone walked up and down each time he made a longer trip, until at last he was pacing and turning close to the table on which lay the revolvers side by side. He did not note it, or if he did his mind was too thrilled with the tender airs and the tenderer liquor to register the fact clearly.

The music stopped. Malone had stooped over the table with the speed of a bird picking up a grain of wheat, and with the same movement he whirled and fired. The gun spun from the hand of the sheriff and he stood staring into the eyes which now beyond all doubt flared with a yellow.

"Now put your hands behind your back after you've thrown those bracelets to me," said Malone. "I naturally hate to break up this party, but I think you've had about enough whisky to keep you warm on the ride back, Lefty, my boy."

There was an insane desire on the sheriff's part to leap upon Malone barehanded, but he had seen too many fighting men in action before. He knew the meaning of those eyes.

"It's your game, Slim," he said, with as little bitterness as possible.

Appleton woke early the next morning. Someone shouted and then fired a pistol. The populace gathered at windows and doors, rubbing sleepy eyes which a moment later shone wide awake, and yawns turned into yells of laughter, for down the middle of Appleton's one street came the sheriff. He was sitting the roan horse, with his feet tied below the girth, and his hands tied behind his back. And even the weary roan seemed to feel in his drooping head the defeat of his rider.

Upon the back of the sheriff was a large piece of cardboard, upon which was printed in large letters the following:

I'M SENDING THIS BACK WITH MY SIGNATURE IN TOKEN OF A PLEASANT EVENING IN MY HOME IN EAGLE HEAD CANYON. I'M SORRY TO ANNOUNCE THAT I'M MOVED.

SLIM MALONE.

THE END


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# NIGHT LAW

By CLARK GRAY

THE girl said, "The famous Frank Climer! The man with the notches on his gun! Want me to hold your hand to give you courage?"

Climer regarded the girl steadily across the counter of the newspaper office. She was an Eastern girl with a delicate oval of a face, blue eyes, pale brown hair. She had an inkstain on the thumb of her right hand. Climber drawled mildly,

"Pull in your claws, honey. You want to print the story?"

"Oh we'll print it." The girl's full lips curved downward. She looked at him as she might have looked at a snake crawling across the sidewalk. "We'll even give you a byline. Frank Climer, the great gunslinger."

Climer took out a cigarette and tapped it on the edge of the counter. He had come here because he had been the only witness to a killing. The sheriff had seemed strangely uninterested in his story, so Climer, out of a sense of duty, had brought his facts to the only other place he knew where they could be made public. And now the girl behind the counter of the *Sandhill Gazetteer* was treating him with undisguised contempt.

Climer believed he understood the girl and her contempt. He had seen the crusading type before. He said, "Yeah, I was a gunslinger, honey. I protected my grass when it needed protecting. I fought my own battles, and I didn't ask for help. You don't have to like me. But do you want the story?"

The girl flushed, and Climer sensed he had shamed her a little. She bent to fish under the counter for pencil and paper. Climer noted that her hair was scrupulously clean. He could even smell her cool soap scent mingled with the printer's ink of the Gazeteer office. When she straightened and poised her pencil over the paper, waiting, Climer lit his cigarette, grinning flatly though the smoke.

"You know Benny Tugwell, the deputy sheriff? He's the killer. He's the one that shot that drunk, then robbed him."

The girl scribbled vigorously. Climer sent a lazy smoke ring floating toward the ceiling. He was large and ugly. He had a laborer's hands, puffy and calloused. His nose had been broken once; it gave his profile a bleak, jagged look. He had a bullet scar or two on his beefy body. He was twenty-nine, and already he felt like an old dog, too weary and proud to accept any trouble that was not his own.

The girl said, "Where was the killing?"

"Behind the Owl Saloon. Just after dark last night. I happened to be in the alley—I was crossing through to check on my horse in the livery. I saw Tugwell drag this young drunk out the back door and hit him once with his pistol barrel. When the drunk fell down, Tugwell shot him through the chest. Then he went through his pockets . . ."

The point of the girl's pencil snapped against her paper. When she looked up, Climer saw that she was biting her lower lip, and she was pale. "Murder," she breathed. "Cold-blooded murder, right here in Sandhill! And by our own law officers."

Climer shrugged wryly. "It's happened before. It'll happen again. It takes a country a while to get civilized."

Her eyes flashed toward him. Scorn made her nostrils flare. "It must be nice to believe that! It must be very comforting!"

Climer stepped on his cigarette. He was finding it difficult to control his annoyance at this girl. The crusaders came from their cosy yankee villages, and they were shocked at the lawlessness, the gambling, and killing. Filled with righteous wrath, they tried to make the West a carbon copy of the East, with police on every corner, with Sunday school socials and fancy weddings, and women's art clubs. Which was okay, Climer thought.

Which was fine, as long as they didn't ask Frank Climer to do it for them. He laid his hand flat on the counter and said patiently,

"You make things too simple, honey. Police officials and courts don't civilize a country. It's what the people do."

"All right." The girl's voice was high-pitched. "You're one of the people. You're the great Climer. What did you do when you saw this murder?"

Climer smiled at her argument, seeing it as childish. "I wasn't armed. Tugwell was. I went on into the livery, walking soft." He hesitated. "What would you have done?"

The girl refused to answer. She reached for another pencil. She wrote. Her voice became business-like again. "Did you do anything else? Go to see the sheriff, for instance?"

"I did, this morning. I told him what I'd seen. But you know Maxie. He's old and hard of hearing. He likes to sit in his swivel chair and draw the county's pay and let his deputies do the work. I couldn't convince him I hadn't made a mistake."

"You got no action from the sheriff, then?"

"That's right."

She wrote. Behind her, Climer could see the black, hulking press, a silent mass of machinery that was as foreign to him as to the girl herself. An old man wearing a green eyeshade and black sleeve protectors was setting type, perched on a high stool. The girl looked up. "And now you feel," she said with acid sarcasm, "that you have done your duty?"

Climer stared at her, fully angered now by her impertinence. "What you want me to do?" He asked harshly. "Take a gun to Tugwell myself?"

"The great Frank Climer," the girl said. She tipped her head and put a finger to her chin and appraised him with scorn. "A poor drunken cowboy gets killed, and the great gunslinger lets it happen. The great gunslinger thinks we need time to become civilized. Meanwhile, more innocent men get killed. It's too bad, but the great Frank Climer can't be bothered."

If she had been a man, Climer thought, he would have slapped sense into her with his big calloused hands. Certainly no man in Sandhill would dare that kind of talk. He turned to walk out, but some impulse to defend himself boiled up inside him, and instead he tapped out another cigarette, feeling his fingers shake as he lit the match.

"Listen, girl. Let's be honest a minute. We both know that Doc Mercedes and his gun boy, Benny Tugwell, can get away with anything, including murder." He expelled smoke savagely.

"But that isn't my business. My business is seven hundred cows and calves and five thousand acres of good prairie grassland. It's the people of Sandhill who let Doc run wild. Now girl, you live in Sandhill. I don't. If you want your town cleaned up, clean it up yourself."

Then he stalked to the door, and when he turned the girl was staring at him with her face white as paper. She had her lower lip between her teeth again; her eyes were big and pained.

"And don't," Climer said, "try to buy my gun. It ain't for sale."

HE got his horse and rode through town, a big, heavy man as solid as his reputation.

Storekeepers, merchants, spoke to him or waved as he passed down the dusty main street. He was still on the right side of thirty, but he had known respect and the obeisance money brings for nearly ten years now, since the wild free-range days when he had accumulated his spread. It hurt to have even one member of the town question his devotion to his duty. Especially, he admitted with a wry grin, when that one member was a slip of a girl who belonged in a kitchen instead of a newspaper office. He fell to thinking about the girl on the long ride home.

Her name, he knew, was Mary Baker. She had come here a year ago with her father to establish the *Gazetteer*. She did the editorial work, sold the advertising, kept the books.

Her father was the printer. Between

them they had made a paying proposition of their paper, but gossip among the ranch hands had it that their editorial slant was displeasing to Doc Mercedes. Gossip also had it that Mary Baker's good looks—plus Doc Mercedes's known liking for a pretty figure were all that had kept him from cracking down on the *Gazeteer*. Climer was not a man to worry about other people's troubles, but he found to his own wry amusement that he was still thinking of those two when he rode into his headquarters in the white glare of mid-afternoon.

The big house that he had built looked cool and inviting in the heat. The six mowing machines were gone from their accustomed places by the haybarn, which meant that the crews were working. Three punchers were breaking horses in the corral. Climer had a word with the punchers, changed horses, and rode out to examine his pastures with a feeling of relief.

He crossed the sweet-smelling swaths of cut grass, waving now and then to the men who rode the clacking mowers with their teams. Twice he got down to search for sagebrush, but he found only a sprig here and there among the grass in spots that had been heavily infested a few years earlier.

His weariness lifted as he rode back toward headquarters. The eradication of the sage was a triumph. For while sagebrush might be picturesque, it was a weed, and a successful rancher had to regard it as a weed. After much study of the plant, Climer had concluded that mowing might kill it. Experience was proving him right.

This was his work, something he understood. For ten years now his whole life had been dedicated to the building of his ranch, his grass. Certainly, he told himself, a thing like this was as important as anything a man could do. In his own way he was bringing civilization to the state, just as Mary Baker was with her newspaper.

He ate the supper placed before him by the Chinese cook without seeing it. As he undressed for bed he was thinking that with the sage gone, his land would support more cattle. More beef for the hungry mouths in the east. More for Frank Climer.

He was blowing out the lamp when he heard the sound of a wagon in the yard.

A little startled, he slipped on his trousers and boots, relit the lamp, swearing as he burned his fingers on the hot chimney. Ten years ago, night riders would have meant trouble. Instinctively he slipped his gun from its pegs on the wall.

He hobbled to the front door with the gun rammed in his belt. Swinging open the door, he glimpsed two figures dismounting from the wagon just outside the picket fence. One of them was a woman. Climer swore, his intuition warning him of what had happened.

The picket gate opened and Mary Baker and her father came slowly up the walk. the old man leaning slightly on the girl.

The old man wore no hat. He was nearly bald. His eyes stared vacantly into space if he saw anything it was a picture in his own mind. He had a bloody strip of cloth around his forehead.

Climer said, "All right. Come on in. I knew Doc Mercedes would do this, sooner or later."

HE showed them into his living room, lit another lamp, wakened his Chinese cook and set him to heating water and making coffee. He returned to the living room with a roll of bandage and a bottle of iodine, and anger fermented like yeast in him. They had to be fools, he thought. They had to try and change the world, and they damned well deserved what they got. He found the girl tenderly removing the strip of cloth from the old man's head.

Climer said harshly, "Let me do that. I know more about it than you ever will. There's whiskey in the sideboard. Get him a drink, and one for yourself, too. You look like you need it."

The girl dropped her hands and stared at him a moment. Climer knew that she was thinking about him, appraising him. Then wordlessly she moved toward the sideboard.

The wound was a three-inch gash in the scalp, caused doubtless by a pistol barrel. It was painful, but not serious. Climer cleaned it with hot water, sterilized it, bandaged it. Then he dismissed the Chinese and stood smoking and watching while the girl and the old man sat drinking coffee. The heat of the coffee brought color back to their cheeks; the old man's eyes lost their blank look.

Climer said, "Doc didn't like the story you printed about the killing?"

The girl shook her head. She was, Climer saw, very close to tears. The old man spoke in a surprisingly deep voice. "He burned the shop. Pied my type. Wrecked the press. Ordered us out of the county. Said he'd kill us if we didn't leave." The old man shrugged wearily. "We left."

Climer nodded. Studying them both, he saw now that they were beaten. Crusaders rarely lasted long against the pitiless realities of this country. Climer decided that he was glad it was over so soon. It would be easier for both of them. He felt his anger ease a little. He said, "I never took much interest in Sandhill's politics. How does Doc get away with this?"

He had expected an answer from the girl, but it was the old man's eyes that brightened, the old man who spoke again in that deep voice.

"I'm an old newspaperman, Mr. Climer. I have seen these things before. Men like Doc Mercedes have a number of tools at their disposal. Money is one. Fear is another—you know Doc never makes a move without his bodyguard, Benny Tugwell. I suspect blackmail is another. A clever man like Mercedes doesn't find it too difficult to control a local political organization, if he's unscrupulous enough."

Climer said curiously, "But why? What does he get out of it?"

"It's fairly profitable. There's gambling, which is, of course, illegal since statehood. Gambling goes on in half the back rooms in town, and Doc takes a cut from every pot. Then there's protection money from wanted criminals who need a hideout. There's plain thuggery—such as Benny Tugwell murdering that drunken cowboy for the contents of his pockets. There are—" The old man glanced sideways at his daughter. "There are other illegal enterprises."

"But why? There are legal enterprises, too. Like you say, Mercedes is a clever man. Couldn't he make more money in an honest business?"

"I believe he could." The old man nodded. "I do not know why he does not do so. That is a question of the man's character."

Climer rose, snubbed out his cigarette in an ash try. He glanced at the girl. Weariness had brought a faint flush to her cheeks now. He said, "I'll bed down on the sofa. Mr. Baker, you take my room. Mary can have the spare bedroom. You'd better turn in now, both of you. I'll have the cook call you for breakfast."

He slept fitfully the rest of the night. Uneasiness filled him; a vagrant sense of guilt came to life to make him troubled.

He had no intention of inviting the girl and her father to remain here. They had been ordered out of the county by Doc Mercedes; it was for their own good that they should go. It was, Climer reminded himself, no business of his that they were being unjustly persecuted. His business was cows. Cows and grass, he thought, and to hell with politicians and crusaders.

He rose early, ate a lone breakfast, then left the house by the kitchen, slamming the screen door behind him. Outside he threw away his cigarette and took a deep breath. This was the time of day he liked best, with the sun only half an hour high, with the motionless air still full of its fresh night-odor. Dew lay thick on the corral boards. The morning, Climer thought, was as fresh and new as mornings must have been in the dawn of time. He crossed the yard toward the corrals and caught up his horse. He was saddling when two horsemen rode around the corner of the bunkhouse.

Something about the posture of the two alerted Climer. He put his hand to his hatbrim and squinted against the low morning sun, and he recognized Doc Mer-

cedes and Benny Tugwell. Climer swore softly and viciously.

He let his horse stand where it was. He climbed the corral, feeling the dew under his hands but ignoring it. He threw one leg across the top corral rail and waited there, straddling it, while the two approached.

Benny Tugwell had the corners of his mouth pulled down, trying to look ominous. Tugwell was nothing, Climer knew. A punk, a young killer. He had a smooth adolescent face with just a suspicion of down where the whiskers should have been. He affected a white Stetson and crossed gunbelt, and he managed somehow to ride a horse with a swagger. Without Doc Mercedes, Benny Tugwell would have been in jail before now, or in a coffin with noose marks around his neck. It was Doc who had kept Benny alive, but Benny didn't know that.

Doc Mercedes was a paunchy, balding man with an engaging smile. He looked like a druggist or maybe a doctor gone to seed. There was nothing about him to suggest that his nod bossed a whole county. Doc didn't ride a horse well. He looked rumpled and uncomfortable as he dismounted, and he walked toward Climer grinning and rubbing the seat of his britches ruefully.

"You put me to a long ride, Climer. And me a fat man." There was only mild humor in Mercedes' voice.

Climer said, "Did I? I don't remember giving you an invite."

Doc Mercedes' grin faded slightly. Benny Tugwell made a casual move with his left hand, hooking a thumb in his belt over the butt of his gun. Climer became aware of a tense silence settling over the buildings, broken only by the complaining nicker of his horse at having to stand half saddled. He rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully.

Mercedes said, "I want Baker and the girl out of the county, Cilmer. You aim to keep 'em here?"

Climer caught a glint of movement from the kitchen door of his house. The screen door was swinging open. Without moving his glance from Mercedes' face, Climer was able to distinguish the lean figure standing in the open doorway with the bandage around its bald head, with the rifle in its hands.

"I wouldn't move too sudden, boys." He shrugged apologetically. "The old man don't like you very much."

DOC MERCEDES' lips froze in their smiling position. Benny Tugwell's hands came away from his guns. Both men moved their heads slightly, glanced at the old man who was advancing toward them now with the rifle cradled in his elbow.

"I came here peaceable, Climer," Mercedes complained. "Let's not get rough."

"Wouldn't think of it." Dropping easily off the corral, Climer took the two guns from Tugwell, the one from Mercedes. He tossed Tugwell's guns through the rails to the dusty floor of the corral. He kept Mercedes'. He grinned flatly.

"Mercedes, somebody hit that old man with a pistol barrel last night. I don't think it was a very nice thing to do."

He stepped forward one pace, slashed downward. Doc Mercedes groaned and dropped to his knees, hands clasping a bleeding head. Climer heard Benny Tugwell's curse, and he twisted in time to see the young killer lunging for him.

Climer kept the gun in his right hand, but he did not use it. He put the weight of his arm behind his beefy fist. He slugged Tugwell squarely in the eyes, driving the youngster back into the corrals with force enough to make the rails creak in protest.

Breathing heavily he backed off, keeping the two men covered now.

"All right, boys," he said. "You get on your horses and ride out of here. And stay off my property. Doc, you may own the town, but I own my ranch. Nobody is going to tell me who I can invite to stay here. Now ride!"

He stood in the kitchen door and watched them till they passed through the barbed-wire gate and reached the road. Then he went glumly inside. Mary Baker was standing by the window with a handkerchief clenched tight in her small fist.

"He'll hate you, too, now; Oh, Frank, I—I'm sorry!"

She was small and fragile and very beautiful; she looked more than ever like a girl who belonged in a kitchen instead of a printshop. But not his kitchen, Climer reminded himself grimly. Not with things the way they were. He motioned the girl and the old man to sit down to their breakfast, which was waiting on the table. He lit a smoke and selected his words with care. He said, "Mercedes is a little different from the old-time outlaw. Ten years ago he'd have been a rustler, a stage robber, something like that. But times have changed since statehood, and crooks have got to be smarter. Mercedes is plenty smart. He knows he can't afford to start a war with me, and he won't."

Climer hesitated, twisting the cigarette in his fingers. He wanted to say this as gently as possible. He looked squarely at the girl. "He won't make trouble—unless he's forced to."

The girl's pale cheeks reddened. The old man picked up a fork and stared at it as if he had never seen a fork before. The girl said in an unnatural voice, "You mean he won't make you trouble if we—if we leave?"

"Put yourself in Doc's place," Climer said harshly. "What would you do?"

The old man got stiffly to his feet. The flesh around his face seemed to sag, seemed suddenly haggard to Climer. But there was pride in the way the old man held his head; there was grave courtesy in his deep voice.

"You have been very hospitable, Mr. Climer. And we are most grateful. We will pack our belongings and be gone by sundown." The old man paused. "Will that be soon enough?"

Climer said. "That'll be fine." And he turned on his heel and strode swiftly out of the house.

He finished saddling and rode out. He hated himself. He rode to the north line of his property, where a new fence was under construction, and took a posthole digger from a sweating puncher. For an hour he worked, swinging the digger with great savage thrusts deep into the soil. When he got on his horse and rode away, he was aware that the puncher's eyes followed him with awe. But the physical labor didn't help. He rode without direction, without purpose, framing curses.

Each man had his duty, Climer thought. And each man's duty was important. And a man had no business swerving from the set line of that duty.

It was not Frank Climer's job to protect the crusaders from their own folly. Frank Climer's job was to raise beef. He kept telling himself these things when he returned to headquarters at noon he was still telling himself, still not sure that he believed them.

Mary Baker sat alone at the dining-room table. She had a steaming steak before her. She cut it idly with her knife, glancing at Climer from under her eyebrows as he entered. He sensed something furtive in her manner, and it ticked a warning to him.

He said, "Where's your dad?"

"Gone to town." She laid down her knife and rose, defiance in the set of her back. "He—he wanted to salvage what type he could. He didn't think you'd permit him to go, so he left while you were gone."

Climer said drily. "He was sure as hell right. He's made a mistake that'll probably kill him!"

HE stalked into his bedroom and took the six-gun from its pegs. He lifted the holster from his dresser drawer, filled the shell loops with cartridges from a box he had bought three years ago. A quiet, deadly fury was in him. Fools, he thought, deserved what Mary and her father were getting. And they were fools. Ignorant, reckless fools, too stubborn to understand the country or its men. He strode blindly back into the dining-room and faced Mary. She had a stricken look on her face.

"You're wrong! They wouldn't kill him! Not just because he tried to get back his property!"

Climer said, "Mercedes won't stop to ask about that. He told your dad to git. Your dad didn't git. So Mercedes will kill him." He drew the gun from holster,

checked the loads, spun the cylinder. He said brutally, "If I can beat your dad to town, I'll bring him back and shoo you two across the county line myself. But don't count on that. If you've got a black dress, you'd better lay it out."

He crossed the yard at a lurching run and saddled a fresh horse with a speed that boogered the animal and set its ears back. When he mounted, the horse pitched across the corral in a series of stiff-legged jumps, sending Climer's gunbelt bouncing up under his armpits. Swearing softly, he brought it under control and let it have its head in a hard run toward town.

Sandhill was too far north to be a *siesta* town; nevertheless it was unnaturally quiet when Climer brought the foaming horse to a stop before the partly-burned wreckage of the *Gazetteer* office. Dismounting, he noted the quiet abstractedly, tucked it into a corner of his mind for future reference. He crossed the boardwalk and peered into the wreckage of the shop. He saw the old man immediately.

The old man lay across a charred timber. He had been bending over there, evidently, to pick up a piece of type. He had been shot once in the back, just under the right shoulder. He was unconscious, but still breathing very faintly.

Climer picked him up as gently as he could. In his mind the thought was circling that the old man had never had a chance. No more than the harmless drunk Tugwell had killed. No more, perhaps, than any other resident of Sandhill. He carried the old man slowly downstreet, to the doctor's office over the drugstore.

Doc Mercedes's office was over the bank, approached by a sun-soaked outside stairway. Benny Tugwell was lounging against the rail at the head of the stairs.

Climer went up the stairs with his eyes on Tugwell, with the cigarette hanging from the corner of his lips. At the little landing outside Mercedes door he halted.

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—for details of this new Wonder Annual.

Benny Tugwell said, "Did you get an invite to this town, Climer?"

Climer said, "A man don't need an invite to come to town, Benny."

He kicked Tugwell in the knee, and at the same time brought up his elbow, raming it between Tugwell's chin and his chest, shoving the man against the wall of the office. Tugwell grunted; his eyes bugged; he clawed frantically with his hands. Climer took his elbow away and hit Tugwell in the chin. Tugwell lost his footing and skidded sideways, over the lip of the stairs. He went sliding down the stairs, unable to stop, his face bumping the tread of every step. When he reached the bottom he lay still.

Climer opened the door and went into the office.

Doc Mercedes sat at his desk, and he, too, was smiling. He had a patch of adhesive tape on his scalp. He had two or three books stacked before him on the desk. He was resting a pistol barrel atop the books.

Mercedes said, "So Benny couldn't do the job?"

Climer shook his head. He grinned. "I'm the great gunslinger, Doc. But maybe you didn't know that."

"I knew." Mercedes regarded him shrewdly. "You could have stayed out of this, Climer."

"So could you. Why didn't you, Doc? I've wondered about that."

Mercedes shrugged. "A man likes to have his fun."

"So it's fun to you? Managing crooked politics. Bribing, blackmail, extortion. You like that?"

Mercedes spread his hands. "Some men are born to be obeyed. I'm one of them."

It took only a small fraction of time for Mercedes to spread his hands, but in that moment he was not touching his gun. Climer drew.

IN the old days before statehood, when a rancher had had to protect his grass, the man with the smoothest, quickest draw was the man who kept rustlers and land-grabbers off his place. Climer had learned to draw because it was a duty to his grass and cattle, just as mowing sage had become a duty later on. So he was able to squeeze off his shot just a split second before Mercedes. Mercedes' shot plowed harmlessly into the floor between Climer's boots. Climer's shot took Mercedes just above the nose.

Boots clattered on the stairway as Climer holstered his smoking gun. Sheriff Arthur Maxie burst inside. Maxie, the man who had taken Mercedes' pay, who had closed his eyes to murder, who liked to ride a swivel chair better than a horse. Maxie roared, "What's this?"

Climer looked mildly at Maxie and said, "A little case of self defense, Maxie. Don't it look like it to you?"

Maxie had his look around. He was a fat man. He had been sheriff for thirty years here. Which meant, Climer thought, that Maxie must like the job. Moreover, Maxie must know the tricks needed to hold it. Maxie said slowly,

"I wouldn't doubt but what you're right, Frank. By the way, that newspaper girl rode into town ten minutes ago. I sent her up to the doctor's office."

Climer saw her as soon as he hit the street. She was just leaving the drugstore, coming toward him with her brown hair mussed and her blue eyes bright with some shining emotion.

When she reached him, she took both his big, calloused hands in hers and held them.

"Dad's going to be all right. You saved him," she said.

Climer grinned. He felt a little easier in his mind than yesterday. A little cleaner. He said, "You can move back to town now, if you want."

The girl said, "We've got no press. No building."

Climer freed one of his hands and took a cigarette from his shirt pocket. He turned the cigarette between thumb and forefinger, not seeing it.

Climer said very gravely, " I've got a little money stashed away. I could invest it. That is—if you'd care to take a partner."

THE END

# FENCE MEANS FIGHT!

By ROE RICHMOND

*Shots rocketed down at them from the crags, catching Goff on the wire*

## CHAPTER I

### WINCHESTER WINTER!

THE men around the horseshoe table were richly dressed, well-fed, and well-barbered, with an unmistakable air of prosperity and affluence. They smoked expensive cigars, toyed with tall glasses of excellent whiskey, and listened indifferently to the three men who stood by the door.

The scene was the Stockmen's private dining-room in the Inter-Ocean Hotel of Cheyenne, late in the year of 1886. Winter was already white and howling at the curtained windows, but the lamplit room was stove-warmed and comfortable.

The two men at the head of the table were obviously the leaders, and it was to them the remarks were primarily addressed. Big John Duffield, massive and rugged, ruthless and domineering even in repose, was gray-haired and iron-jawed,

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hawk-nosed and cruel-mouthed. His Crown-D was the largest spread on the Laramie Plains.

His companion, Lute Bromley, owned the second biggest layout, the Anvil-B, and was an enormously fat and jovial man, harmless and innocent in appearance, but no less rapacious and grasping than Duffield in reality. The three standing men, roughly dressed in range clothes, were small ranchers from Rawhide Creek in the north. Dan Stryker, the tallest of the trio, was doing most of the talking in a slow softly-intense voice.

"It's bound to be a bad winter, and another one like '83 will wipe us out," Stryker said, in conclusion of a rather lengthy speech. "Unless those fences come down, so our cattle can get to shelter."

"What makes you think it'll be a bad one?" asked Duffield.

"You can feel it comin'." Stryker said. "And the Gross Ventre Indians have already seen big white Arctic owls down this way."

"Full of firewater, the Gros Ventre Indians are apt to see most anythin'," said Lute Bromley dryly, and the seated men chuckled and snickered appreciatively.

"Real funny," Stryker drawled, his rangy, rawboned figure seeming to grow taller, his lean angular face hardening, and his light gray eyes flaring coldly.

Beside him Mark Blasser spoke with deep-toned bitterness: "It'll be a lot funnier when thousands of head of beef are piled up dead against them damn-fool fences!" Broad and square, Blasser stood solidly planted, boots well apart, thumbs hooked in shell belt, his dark face sullen and ugly, his black eyes shining through narrowed lids.

"Easy, Mark," murmured the third man, Tom Morton, who was medium-sized, neat and trim, quiet, thoughtful and réserved. An intelligent and controlled man, with wavy brown hair, level brown eyes, and a mild courteous manner, that belied his inner core of hardness.

"You know why the range was fenced," Big John Duffield said with irritable impatience. "We had to do it. We were overrun with longropin' honyonkers, stealin' us blind. New brands were springin' up around every chuck-wagon and sod shanty between here and Wind River, brands built on our beef. We had to put up fences to get rid of all those ragged-pants bobtailed fly-by-night nesters and rustlers."

"Well, they're gone now," Dan Stryker said.

"Not all of them," muttered a man at the table, furtively slurring and sneering.

STRYKER stepped forward. "Get on your feet and say what you've got to say, mister!" His voice was low and deadly, his face a scarred bronze mask.

The man neither moved nor spoke. Lute Bromley raised his pudgy palms, as if beseeching Stryker to be reasonable. John Duffield glared at Stryker and said: "If you want to fight, we've got some men outside who'll accommodate you."

"Sure, I haven't forgotten your hired guns," Stryker said, as Tom Morton took his arm and tugged him back away from the table.

"We're wastin' our time here, boys," growled Mark Blasser.

"Not to mention ours," one of the seated ranchers put in.

Stryker nodded dully. Through it all he'd had the hopeless feeling of talking to a roomful of deaf mutes, or people who spoke and understood a different language. Talking to a blank wall.

"There'll be trouble, John," said Stryker. "When our steers start dyin' on your wire."

"We're runnin' the very same risks with our own herds," John Duffield declared.

"No, you aren't," Stryker said quietly. "You've got Goshen Hole to winter your stock in."

Lute Bromley shrugged ponderously. "If this climate's too rough for you boys why don't all of you sell out and move south?"

Stryker laughed softly. "We'll freeze out first, fat man."

"You could open the Hole up to us," suggested Tom Morton.

"No room," Duffield said shortly. "Crowded, as it is."

Mark Blasser snorted low in his thick corded throat. "Let's get out of this rattlesnake nest, before I start cleanin' house!"

"So the fences stay up?" Stryker drawled.

"That's right," John Duffield said. "And don't try cuttin' them down either. If you want to stay healthy and out of jail."

"They'll come down," Stryker said gently. "When our cattle start hangin' and freezin' to death on them."

"Then you'll go down, too," Duffield told him harshly.

"Maybe so," drawled Stryker. "But you better hire in some more gunhands, John."

"Tell that to Hackett and Lauck."

"And Keeshan and Skowron," added Lute Bromley.

"I'll tell 'em," Stryker said simply. "On the way out."

John Duffield stood up abruptly, a gray-haired giant, towering even above Stryker's rawboned six foot two height. "You'd better take that way now. This meetin' is over—so far as you're concerned!" He was angry and it stained his high cheekbones red, lighted his yellowish eagle-eyes.

"Thank you, John," Stryker said with quiet irony. "We're much obliged—for everythin'."

"By the Almighty!" raged Big John Duffield. "I gave you three your start in this country, and now you turn on me like this. You came in here with trail herds, ownin' nothin' but your broken-down ponies and worn-out saddles, your guns and the clothes on your back. I gave you work at top pay, and let you maverick around until you had enough slicks for spreads of your own. Now you want somethin' besides!"

"What did *you* have when you started out, John?" inquired Stryker.

Duffield gestured wildly, his face almost purple. "Get out of here!" he roared. "And if I ever hear of you even speakin' to my daughter again, I'll turn Hack and Lucky loose on you!"

Smiling his rare boyish smile, Stryker held the door for Morton and Blasser, pausing halfway through it himself. "What do I do if she speaks to me first, John?"

Swearing furiously, Big John Duffield swept up his glass and hurled it blindly, to shatter against the door as Stryker closed it behind him. Loud immoderate laughter sounded through the panels, and Duffield beat his great hands on the table. "If I was only twenty years younger!" he panted, shaking his noble gray head.

"Forget it, John," advised Lute Bromley, pouring him another drink. "We've got younger men to do our fightin' for us now."

Duffield looked at him with thinly-veiled contempt. "It ain't the same though," he said heavily, ungrammatical in his anger. "It ain't like handin' it out yourself."

"What if we do have a real bad winter?" asked one of the others.

John Duffield gulped at his fresh drink. "We'll be all right in Goshen Hole. The little shoestring outfits, like Stryker's, will be out of luck, that's all."

THE three cowmen from the Rawhide had ceased laughing, or even smiling, before they descended the stairs into the lobby of the Inter-Ocean Hotel, which was elaborate and palatial for a frontier town. Dan Stryker was rolling a cigarette, Mark Blasser had bitten off a big chew of tobacco, and Tom Morton was loading his pipe.

As they had anticipated, Hackett and Lauck, the Crown gunmen, were waiting near the foot of the stairway. Hackett was lean, lank, and wiry as whipcord, with a sharp-featured bony triangular shaped face, evil eyes, and a vicious mouth. Lucky Lauck was short, squat, and plump, froglike in general appearance, round-faced, pop-eyed, smiling, and deadly.

"I guess you boys told 'em what's what," Hackett said with an insolent grin.

"You must of scared the big augurs plenty."

"Didn't they take you into the Association?" chortled Lauck. "We figured they'd make you honorary members, at least."

Having worked for Duffield's Crown crew, the Rawhide trio knew this pair well. Stryker strode forward and split them apart, concentrating on Hackett, leaving Lauck to the other two.

"Don't crowd me tonight, Hack," he warned evenly.

"Be tough while you can, big boy," said Hackett. "I'm just waitin' on the word. When it comes you'll get whittled down to size."

"You can start anytime, killer," Stryker told him calmly.

"I work under orders, or you wouldn't still be walkin' around the way you are," Hackett said.

Across the lobby Keeshan and Skowron, Bromley's bodyguards from Anvil, were loitering under a great crystal chandelier. Stryker nodded toward them, his bronze head gold-streaked in the lamplight. "I see you've got backin', as usual."

"I don't need any backin', Stryker," said Hackett. "When the time comes to take you, I'll do it myself."

"That time's comin'," Stryker drawled easily. "Maybe sooner than you think."

The Anvil men watched this scene, their eyes slitted against the blue smoke of their cigars. Bull Keeshan was big, burly, and swaggering, with a broken-nosed brutal face, reddish hair and beard stubble, hot, angry-looking eyes, and a contemptuous mouth. As tall as Stryker and much heavier, Keeshan enjoyed fighting and killing. His partner, Symes Skowron, was long, sinewy, and snakelike, with a small reptilian head and the face of a vulture, cold colorless eyes glinting with a kind of madness.

These four are the backbone of Anvil and Crown, Stryker thought. There aren't too many real gun-fighters left in Wyoming. If we can down these four, when the crisis comes, we'll have Duffield and Bromley pretty well whipped.

Turning away, trailed by the stocky Blasser and the slim Morton, Stryker went to the cloakroom for their hats and sheepskin jackets. He knew Carol Duffield was waiting for him in the Platte House, and he intended to see her, regardless of Big John's threat. If it precipitated a fight, very well, it might as well come now as later.

Stryker thought with cold rage of the other small ranchers in the region, men who were faced with disaster but dared not stand up to the big cattlemen. By sticking together, they could tear down the fences and control the range, but there were too many down-trodden, defeated, gutless men among them, afraid to fight for their rights.

Only Stryker, Morton, and Blasser had the courage to appear before the Stockmen's Association. It hadn't accomplished much, except to clarify their position, but Stryker felt better now that the cards were on the table.

THEY went out past Hackett and Lauck, and on toward the front door, wanting a drink but preferring to have it in more congenial surroundings. The Crown gunhands watched them in scornful silence, but Bull Keeshan shouldered out toward them and spoke raspingly:

"It ain't goin' to be healthy to meddle with fences from here on, Stryker. I hope the big moguls gave you sufficient warnin'."

Dan Stryker eyed him steadily. "They did. And I'll tell you what I told them, Keeshan. When our beef starts dyin' on those fences, the wire'll come down."

"That's your death warrant, Stryker."

"Mine, maybe," Stryker drawled. "And a lot of others, too."

Outside in the night, the wind was blowing and the early snow swirling under the wooden awnings, against the high false-fronted buildings, blurring the lights of Cheyenne. There was little traffic, and only a few scattered horses at the tie-rails. The three men ducked into the gusty air, and Tom Morton asked:

"What are we going to do, Dan?"

"I don't know—yet."

"I reckon you'll be seein' Carol," said Mark Blasser gruffly. "Tom and I'll kinda cover your back, Dan."

In the barroom of the Platte House they had three quick quiet rounds of whiskey, and then Stryker left them to enter the lobby. Carol Duffield was sitting in a far dim corner, and even there the faint straying lamplight touched her coppery head with gleams of red-gold.

Walking toward her, Stryker felt as always the rising warming glow of excitement and pleasure. She looked up, that familiar and well-loved smile brightening her fine clear face, crinkling the slightly-tilted green eyes at the corners, dimpling the soft contours of her cheeks, showing the white perfect teeth between the full red lips.

"How did it go, Dan?" she asked anxiously.

"It didn't," he said, grinning ruefully. "It didn't go at all, Carol."

"I was afraid of that," Carol Duffield admitted, her face sobering. "There's no mercy in those men. Nothing but a lust for more money, more cattle, more power."

"Your dad warned me not to speak to you any more, Cary."

The girl laughed defiantly. "That's one thing he can't dictate, Dan. He can disown me, I suppose, but he can't keep me away from you."

Stryker was silent, grateful, marvelling as usual at her loveliness and the fact that Carol Duffield, who could have married any of the most eligible and successful young men in the Territory, had fallen in love with him, a $50-a-month rider for her father's Crown-D. And still preferred him, now that he was a small struggling rancher on the brink of bankruptcy.

"I'm going to Laramie for the holidays," Carol said. "We can be together there, without any interference."

"I'm liable to be too busy to celebrate, unless this weather breaks," Stryker said gloomily.

"Then I'll come up on the Rawhide with you, Dan," the girl announced promptly.

Stryker's smile was grave, somber. "That'd really open the ball, Cary. That would touch off the fireworks for fair."

Carol Duffield stood up and moved close to him, since they were temporarily alone in the shadowy room. She was rather tall for a girl, lithe and willowy but fully curved, with a clean aristocracy of figure as well as features. Her arms went around his lean hard muscled waist, her fragrance filled his head, and her nearness set his blood on fire.

Her copper-red head went back and her face lifted eagerly, as Stryker's long powerful arms drew her tight against him. Their lips met, crushed and clinging with sweet rapture, and a shimmering wonder lived in the drab dimness, blending them into one.

"Why don't you marry me, and be done with it?" she whispered breathlessly, her eyes wide and awed on the lean, scarred, strong-boned bronze of his face.

"You wouldn't want a shootin' war on our honeymoon," Stryker protested huskily.

"Why not?" she demanded, laughing recklessly. "If you can shoot as straight and fast as I think you can, Dan."

"The odds aren't too good, Cary," he reminded her gently.

Her face was suddenly shocked, her green eyes staring over his wide shoulder at the entrance, her hands pushing frantically against his broad chest.

"Here they come, Dan! Hackett and Lauck!"

## CHAPTER II

### On to the Goshen Death-Trap!

STRYKER released her at once, slipping out of his heavy jacket and flinging it across a chair, loosening his six-gun in the low tied-down sheath of his right thigh, wheeling to face the doorway. Hackett and Lauck came in with a flurry of snow and cold air, slamming the door after them, shaking off snowflakes and pushing back their open sheepskins, to clear the handles of their guns.

Calmly and purposefully, cold and deliberate, they advanced on the couple in the

corner, Hackett, tall and loose-limbed and wolf-jawed, Lauck deceptively plump, soft-looking and smiling.

"You'd better leave, Miss Carol," said Hackett, gesturing left-handed, venomous eyes on Stryker's rangy form.

"I'm staying right here," Carol Duffield said. "And you'd better not start anything, Hack."

"Stryker, you're plumb foolish," Hackett said disgustedly. "After Big John told you and everythin'. What's the matter with you, man?"

"He must be sick of livin', Hack," suggested Lauck in his half-lisping, liquid voice.

Stryker, glancing toward the corridor leading to the barroom, saw four men standing there, Blasser and Morton facing Keeshan and Skowron, a perfect stalemate. He would have to handle these two alone, and he was ready to try it—if Carol hadn't been there.

But perhaps her presence would prevent Hack and Lauck from using their guns. In a barehanded rough-and-tumble brawl, Stryker estimated that his chances should be good enough. Of the four gunsharps, only Bull Keeshan was really formidable without a Colt.

Spaced out about ten feet apart, Hackett and Lauck faced Dan Stryker, and Hack said sneeringly:

"I never thought you'd hide behind a woman's skirts, big boy."

"Why don't you take a walk, Cary?" said Stryker. "This might as well come now as any other time."

"I'm staying, Dan. And I'm evening the odds." Carol Duffield's shapely right hand came out with a .36 Colt in it, cocked and leveled, firm and steady on her father's hired gunmen. "You boys know I can use this thing, and I will. The first man that reaches gets it, and I'll shoot to kill!"

Hackett and Lauck exchanged looks of surprise and perplexity. This affair had gotten out of hand. They knew now they should have waited until Stryker left the girl. They had been over-anxious, having waited so long for an opportunity to get at Stryker. Now they were helpless, handcuffed by their own impulsiveness.

Stryker sauntered toward them. "Maybe you'd like to try it without guns?"

"Kid stuff!" snorted Hackett. "We'll wait and get you right. You won't always have a girl guardin' you."

"Maybe you need a little lesson," Stryker drawled, lashing out suddenly, hooking his left savagely into Hackett's long bony face.

Hackett's head rocked as he lurched sidewise, sprawling across a large armchair. Lauck came leaping in with surprising speed for one of his squat portly build, but Stryker was already shifting his feet and swinging his right fist. It landed squarely in that full fleshy face with a sodden smash, and blood spouted freely as Lauck's big head snapped far back.

Stryker hit him with a left on the way down. Lauck's head and shoulders struck the hardwood floor with jarring crashing force, his fat body bouncing and quivering, settling into a senseless heap.

HACKETT had recovered and was on top of Stryker by that time, hammering wildly away at the blond head and angular face, trying to beat Stryker into the boards. But Stryker hurled him off with an explosive burst, and when Hackett came charging back Stryker's left ripped and raked him, hooking and slashing him blind and off-balance.

As Hackett tottered backward, Stryker unleashed his right hand. It sounded like an ax on the butchering block, lifting Hack bodily, dropping him sideways into the leather chair.

Stryker's momentum carried him forward, too close, and with all his ebbing strength and fury Hackett thrashed out with his long legs, driving the boot heels deep into Stryker's abdomen. Gasping and doubled in the middle, Stryker fought for breath on sagging knees, the agony grinding through his body, turning him sick and faint.

Hackett came up out of that chair like a maniac now, slugging at Stryker's

bowed head and unprotected face, sledging home wicked blows that mashed Stryker's mouth and nose, bruised his eyes, and laid open the prominent cheekbones. Straightening up and staggering back, stunned by the swift shocking concussions, Stryker tripped over Lauck's thick stumpy legs, and the floor rushed up to slam his shoulder blades and drive the breath from his laboring lungs.

Hackett, snarling and blowing blood like a wounded animal, jumped in to kick the life out the fallen enemy. Somehow Stryker wrapped his arms about those stamping legs and rolled on the planks, heaving and spilling Hackett, scrambling free on hands and knees.

They came up almost simultaneously, their breath sobbing in and out with a ragged agonizing sound, blood streaming from their battered faces, soaking their clothes. Hackett, hampered by his jacket, was slower, and Stryker got in the first punch, pouring his whole rangy frame into it. Hackett reeled clear across the lobby, rebounding from the wall, falling flat on his face and lying there, limp and motionless except for his racked breathing.

Stryker wanted to go over and hit him again, but it was altogether too far, not worth the effort. Turning groggily, he stumbled back toward the corner where Carol Duffield stood with the gun still in her hand.

"Sorry—you had to—see it," panted Stryker.

"I didn't mind, Dan," she said, easing him down into an armchair. "They didn't have a chance, until Hackett used his boots. Rest now, Danny, while I get some water and towels."

KEESHAN and Skowron moved into the room to attend to Lauck and Hackett, with Blasser and Morton continuing to watch them closely. The Bull tramped across the floor and stood glaring down at Stryker.

"I wish I'd been in that ruckus," Keeshan growled. "Them two can't fight without guns."

"Your turn'll come," Stryker said slowly, his breath still coming in tortured gasps.

"It'll come all right," grated Bull Keeshan. "You ain't goin' to live long enough to feel happy about winnin' this half-witted fracas."

"Shut up and beat it, Bull," Mark Blasser said through his teeth.

Keeshan looked at him and Morton. "You two'll be gettin' it at the same time."

"We won't go alone," Tom Morton said mildly.

"Come on, Bull," called Symes Skowron. "We got to patch up these two wrecks here. It's a good thing that gal was around, or there'd be four corpses on this floor."

Carol Duffield returned with a basin of water and some towels. Blasser and Morton stood watchfully by while she went to work tenderly and efficiently on Stryker's gashed and swollen face.

After a time Stryker was restored to some semblance of normalcy, revived and refreshed enough to enjoy the bottle Tom Morton had thoughtfully procured from the bar. They had the lobby to themselves, since the Crown and Anvil men and the spectators had disappeared, and Stryker was doing some serious thinking over his drink and the cigarette Blasser had made for him.

"They haven't moved many herds into Goshen Hole yet, have they, Carol?" he inquired finally.

"No," she replied. "They're planning the big drive after New Years."

"They say to fight fire with fire," mused Stryker. "Perhaps we can fight fences with fences."

Blasser and Morton nodded grimly, knowing at once what he was considering. There were only two main passes into the Hole, the North and the South, through which large herds could be driven. They had already chipped in to buy and store enough wire to close those comparatively narrow trails, as a last-ditch resort against the big owners.

Stryker had hoped it would never be necessary to employ such tactics, but it

began to look as if it might be their only hope of salvation. And it would certainly convince Duffield and Bromley what death-traps fences can become in a winter storm.

"It's goin' to be war, Cary," said Dan Stryker. "We'd better not see each other again until it's over."

Carol Duffield shook her red-gold head and smiled at his welted misshapen face. "I'm in it, Dan—on your side. I don't see how you're going to get rid of me either."

"Well, here's to Christmas in Laramie," said Tom Morton, lifting his glass.

"And New Years in Goshen Hole," Mark Blasser added solemnly.

THE real winter cold came to the Rawhide before Christmas, earlier than even the most pessimistic had expected, settling in with a bitter iron-hard clamp on the country side. Dan Stryker knew they had waited too long. There was meager consolation in the fact that the big ranchers to the south would be unprepared also.

The Rawhide valley, like the rest of the Laramie Plains, was cross-hatched and cluttered with wire boundary lines now. It had been Big John Duffield's idea to break up the open range, and put an end to the free-for-all rustling of upstart nester outfits. Every Crown and Anvil employee had been induced to file a homestead claim of 1,200 acres, and the other big brands followed suit.

By filing along the streams and fencing the land the water was shut off to the hated honyonkers, who had built up their herds with long ropes, marking knives and running irons, at the expense of the large layouts.

It was illegal, of course, for the riders never intended to homestead the claims, even if the owners had permitted it. It was simply a means of acquiring more graze and water rights, and driving out the small floating outfits of undesirables. But the Law wasn't powerful enough to challenge and oppose men like Duffield and Bromley.

Stryker, Blasser, and Morton, however, filing with the other cowhands, had taken three adjacent claims on Rawhide Creek, well north of the parent spreads. During their employment at Crown, those three had accumulated fair-sized herds of their own, through various methods. Picking up strays and slicks, buying cheap from rustling nesters who were moving out, and occasionally altering brands and fleshmarks. It was common and accepted practice, easy to do with countless herds roaming at large in those lush booming times.

Having filed, Stryker and his two comrades set about trying to prevail on Duffield to let them actually settle and work their claims, arguing that it would lend authenticity to the entire project. Big John, anxious to separate Stryker from his daughter Carol at any cost, finally agreed to the proposition. The three riders left Crown, built homestead shacks, barns and corrals on the Rawhide, hired a couple of hands apiece, and gathered their half-wild cattle from the brush and hills.

For two years they had worked like dogs and now, just when it looked as if another year would see them securely established, in the clear and on the way up, a combination of winter weather and wire fences threatened to destroy all they had created so slowly and laboriously, sweated and strained, suffered and bled for.

A couple of mornings before Christmas, Dan Stryker watched the weather build up in the northern sky, tier on tier of blackening clouds towering above the prairie. The air was hushed, breathless and eerily still, charged with an electric tension and expectancy, that made the livestock as nervous and fretful as the humans.

There was a strong feeling of impending disaster, something dreadful and overwhelming about to break loose on the December earth. Even in the cold, Stryker was sweating under that intense pressure.

Toward noon it began to snow softly, the first flakes large and lazy, falling

straight and slow from the ominous overcast, and Dan Stryker knew for certain the blizzard was coming. After a conference with Morton and Blasser, they decided to start cutting fences so the cattle could drift south before the storm.

"With luck we'll run 'em all the way into Goshen Hole," said Stryker. "And bottle up the South Pass before Crown, Anvil, and the rest of the big herds hit it. Our only chance to save our stock.

The hired hands were appalled by the prospects of such a winter drive and a blighted holiday season, and Stryker could not blame them in the least. But they pledged themselves to stick as far as the junction with the Platte River and Fort Laramie—providing they survived that distance.

Nine men against all the elements, the vested beef interests, the law and order of the Territory, thought Dan Stryker. Nine men against the world.

They dressed as warmly as possible from long flannel underwear to buffalo-hide and sheepskin coats, with fur hunting caps tied under their chins and bandannas drawn across their noses. They wore extra woolen socks in their loosest-fitting boots, and stuffed saddle-bags with grain and corn for the horses, biscuits and jerked beef for themselves. Spare canteens of water and whiskey, and bandoleers of ammunition were tied to the saddles. Each man was armed with wire-cutters and files, as well as Colt revolvers and Winchester carbines.

The blizzard struck with smoking fury before they got started, blasting out of the north, bringing bottomless darkness and sleet-like snow that slashed, stung, and cut through the heaviest clothing. Already cattle were piled up and dying on the wire to the north, as the men rode out into the blinding gale and deployed across the shallow valley of the Rawhide, to breach the fences that ran east-and-west. The steers would surge due south under that lashing north wind. The men would have to work like mad to keep the way open, and always at their ice-glazed backs was the danger of stampedes.

The wind all but ripped a man from his saddle, tearing the breath from his throat and lungs, and the cold was a searing penetrating and terrible thing. It was impossible to see more than a few feet in that boiling white inferno, and all you could do was keep a loose rein and give the horse his head.

They cut the first two barriers ahead of the cattle, but before they reached the third steers were streaming and bawling past them on all sides, ghostly forms plunging and snorting in terror. They wouldn't be turned, and the only thing to do was drift along with them.

In places the drifts were so deep the riders' boots and stirrups dragged in the snow. The cold was a horror that cloaked them from head to heels, chilling and cramping, biting through clothes and flesh into the very bone.

At the third fence, cattle were bunched and entangled in every coulee and swale, bucking, fighting, and trampling one another, scrabbling and stomping over the fallen, bawling pitifully beneath the awful sustained shriek of the wind, crippled and freezing and dying with their legs caught and broken in the wire.

It wasn't safe to cut through in the low places where the animals were gathered, for the ensuing stampede would immediately overrun and obliterate horse and rider. Hoping that the others would foresee this but unable to communicate with them, Stryker attacked the fence with his clippers at the slightly higher points between the beef-packed brawling washes.

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He emptied his sixgun a couple of times to put some of the tortured trapped creatures out of their misery, while fury and hatred for Duffield, Bromley, and the rest of the rich owners, swelled in Stryker until it approximated the violence of the blizzard.

THE remainder of that storm-torn afternoon was a hideous nightmare, with men and horses toiling on, suffering untold agonies and fighting the endless battle against insurmountable odds. Darkness came early, a mere thickening of the dim shrouded daylight, and the wind died down a bit, so Stryker was able to find the line shack they had agreed to rendezvous in at dusk.

Tom Morton was already there with his two riders, and had a fire roaring in the stove, while Fulbright and McMinn were rubbing down and graining the horses in the adjoining shed. Stryker left his mount and stumbled into the large main cabin on numb aching legs, encrusted with snow and ice, eyebrows frosted white, weary enough to lie down and die.

The relief of the warmth and the presence of the others was so great that Stryker was on the verge of crying like a small boy, who had found his way home after being hopelessly lost.

He was still thawing out and worrying about the others when Selby staggered in out of the storm, followed a few moments later by his employer, Mark Blasser. They both expressed fear concerning Goff, the other Blasser man. And Stryker was beginning to wonder if he had sent his two hands, old Nealley and young Rhoads, to their death.

At intervals, one or another of the men stepped outside and fired several shots into the air, to guide the three stray riders to the shanty—if they were still alive. Young Rhoads arrived at last, his cheeks yellowish-white with frostbite, his eyes haunted.

"Old Neal's gone," he reported with bitterness. "Horse bogged down, and the steers stampeded over 'em. Tried to get in to him, but I didn't have a chance—until the cattle were gone." Rhoads choked and swallowed hard. "Wasn't much left of Nealley and the horse."

Stryker handed him a tin cupful of whiskey, and the boy drained it like water.

They built an outside fire and shot off some more shells to indicate their position, but Goff didn't come in. Once they were rested and fed, Stryker and Blasser rode back to search for him in the night, but found no trace of the man or his mount. Goff was undoubtedly buried under one of those grotesque mounds of dead beef. Or lost somewhere and frozen to death.

"Two men in half a day," snarled Mark Blasser. "I don't know as it's worth it, Dan."

"It's worth it to me—and maybe you and Tom," said Stryker. "But not to the others. Not to any thirty-a-month man, Mark. We'll send them into Laramie tomorrow."

"And you're goin' through, Dan?"

"All the way to Goshen Hole," Stryker said with simple conviction.

"Sure, me too," muttered Mark Blasser. "I got nobody to celebrate Christmas with. And nothin' to celebrate, unless we save some of our beef."

## CHAPTER III

### The Living Dead

IN the morning it was wickedly cold as ever, the prairie drifted yards deep in places, scoured bare in others, but the blizzard had blown itself out toward the south. With visibility better and no gale-whipped sleet to buffet them, the men could and did work much faster.

The hired hands had been offered leave to depart for Laramie, but Selby chose to backtrack and hunt for Goff, or his body, and the others said they would cut wire to the Platte, since it was practically on their way to the town.

There were windrows of dead cattle, scattered stark and stiff along each wire-fenced boundary. There were others, alive but in horrible agony, bleeding from hocks and chins and nostrils, some with frozen

tails, and hoofs actually broken off standing on bloody stumps and bleating mournfully. These agonized and hopelessly crippled brutes were killed as fast as the riders could pump bullets into them.

But a great many more had somehow weathered and survived the cruel night, finding some shelter and nourishment in the narrow rock-rimmed canyons and broken terrain on either side of the Rawhide. These came trailing out as the men labored southward, and the herd grew constantly as it drifted toward the Platte.

The cattle could be driven today, and Stryker devised a system to speed up progress. He and young Rhoads worked ahead, clearing the way with their wire-cutters, while Blasser and Morton with Fulbright and McMinn pushed the steers along through the openings. As the forenoon wore on, they were making pretty fair trail-herd time, considering the cold and the treacherous snow-and-ice footing, and the fences that Stryker slashed at as if they were flesh-and-blood foes.

Early in the afternoon they crossed the Platte River on a solid bed of ice, and halted to warm up and eat lunch in a line shack on the southern shore. The wind was rising again, howling out of the north and carrying fine hard particles of snow.

The cattle moved on before it, but the Rawhide men were no longer worried about their surviving stock. There were no more fences between here and the North Pass to Goshen Hole. The worst was over, Stryker thought, and the way was clear.

The next fight would be against men and guns.

Fulbright and McMinn were branching off westward here, to spend Christmas Eve with their families in Laramie, but young Rhoads had decided to stay on the trail.

"If I go into town I'll just get drunk and in trouble prob'ly," he remarked philosophically. "I'm better off ridin' this one out, I reckon."

Fulbright and McMinn were rather reluctant and sheepish about leaving the party, but everyone assured them they were doing the right thing, they belonged with their own folks on Christmas. Leaving their whiskey canteens and shaking hands all around, the two married men mounted up and rode off in the direction of Laramie. Selby had not overtaken the drive, after his search for Goff, and it was assumed that he had cut across country toward town.

WITH only four men left, it seemed like a very small group, but they were in good spirits as they swung on after the herd, riding toward the mouth of Horse Creek and the wide-open trail to Goshen Hole. There might be Crown and Anvil guards at the entrance, but they were going through regardless. They had done a great job of work in the last two days, and they were ready to do another against whatever kind of odds came up.

An hour or so later, bringing up the drag of the wind-driven herd, Dan Stryker spotted a lone rider coming up fast from behind. Pointing him out to the others, squinting into the wind and snow, Stryker lifted his Winchester out of its scabbard, levered a shell into the chamber, and sat his saddle, calm and waiting. The others got out their carbines and ranged alongside of him.

The sound of wind-torn shots floated to them, as pursuing horsemen bunched into view at the far corner of a rock-ribbed snow-sculptured bench. The bullets raked up streamers of powdery white around the fleeing rider, and then he seemed to jerk and sag in the saddle. Stryker recognized him at that moment.

"It's Fulbright," he said. "They must've got Mac." Stryker surveyed the immediate terrain, on which jumbled ice-sheathed boulders offered adequate cover. "Let's fort up here, boys, two on each flank."

He sidled his big slate-gray gelding to the left, and young Rhoads slanted after him. Blasser and Morton withdrew and dismounted on the right side of the broad trail. Stryker stepped down, ground-tied the gray, and started chipping ice out of a V-shaped niche in the rockpile with the steelshod butt of his carbine.

There looked to be about a half-dozen enemy riders in the pursuit, and Fulbright

semed to be hard hit, barely managing to stay in the leather. Farther back McMinn was no doubt lying dead in the snow. Anger blazed up in Stryker, as he thought of their wives and kids waiting in Laramie on Christmas Eve.

Fulbright had seen them before him, and he kneed his blown mount in behind the barrier of stone on Stryker's side, the horse standing lathered and frost-rimed, with Fulbright hanging in agony over the ice-flecked mane. Stryker lifted him carefully from the saddle, and laid him on the blanket Rhoads had spread over the snowy ground.

"Jumped us," Fulbright sobbed painfully. "Seven of 'em—Anvil and Crown. Got Mac—shot to pieces—the first volley. I got—one of 'em. Had to run. Don't know—how I got out—Dan."

Stryker raised and turned him gently, examined the wound, and said nothing. The slug had gone through shoulder, lung, and chest. Fulbright was dying, and Stryker could do nothing for him.

"I know—I'm done," panted Fulbright. A shudder shook him, but he tried to smile, blood trickling from his mouth. "Maybe warmer—where I'm goin', Dan." He groped weakly for his pocket. "Money here. See that—my folks—get it."

"We'll take care of your family—and Mac's," said Stryker. "We'll see that they get along, Ful. Rest easy now, boy."

STRYKER went back to his cleft in the boulders, blinking his smarting eyes. The enemy hadn't seen them in the snow-screened murk, and the rocks were high enough to hide horses as well as men. Crown and Anvil were coming right in, bent on hunting Fulbright down and finishing him off. Then they'd go on to rout that herd, stampede it away from the Goshen track.

Stryker signalled to Morton and Blasser to hold their fire. He couldn't recognize any of the bundled-up riders as yet, but he hated every one of them.

Come on, come on, he thought, fiercely and eagerly. Ride right into it, you hungry murdering buzzards! It'll take all six of you to even up for McMinn and Fulbright. And a lot more of you to make up for Goff and old Nealley and all that beef.

Sensing danger, the little cavalcade reined up and fanned out, but they were well within rifle range. Stryker swung his right hand sharply, and took aim through that crevice. The shots rang out almost simultaneously. A horse reared screaming and floundered down, flinging his rider clear.

Another man keeled slowly from the saddle, one foot catching in the stirrup as his mount bolted, dragging him head-down over the snow-swept stone-studded surface. And the Rawhide riflemen went on levering and triggering, lashing the horsemen with a terrible withering cross-fire.

Crown and Anvil were shooting back now, wildly from their pitching ponies, the shots spouting small geysers of snow and dirt, or screeching off the rock faces. The marksman who had been thrown fired steadily from a kneeling posture, until Stryker's bullet caught him full in the chest and smashed him over backwards to remain spread-eagled on the reddening white ground.

Another rider buckled and toppled headfirst into a snowdrift, his horse falling beside him, thrashing briefly into stillness, With three down, dead or dying, the other three whirled into panicky flight. But one horse and rider did not get far, cartwheeling end over end in a weltering shower of snow, and sprawling motionless once their momentum ceased. The remaining pair raced on, and were soon safely out of range.

"Let 'em go, kid, let 'em go," Stryker said, as young Rhoads vaulted into his saddle. "It's too bad, they'll cause us trouble, but we can't waste time chasin' 'em." Rhoads cursed and stepped down again.

Reloading his Winchester, Stryker glanced at Fulbright silent and rigid on the blood-stained blanket, and knelt quickly by his side. Fulbright was dead, and Stryker took up the swearing where Rhoads left off.

"If there' any money on those corpses

out there," Stryker said, teeth on edge, "we'll take it—for those kids of Fulbright's and Mac's."

A RAPID burst of gunfire rolled down from the north, and looking up Stryker saw that the two enemy survivors were engaged in another battle, bushwhacked, beaten down and dying, before they realized what had struck them. The hammering rifle reports echoed, faded, and two more men lay huddled on the white valley floor, with one of their horses kicking in the death throes nearby.

All six of them, a clean sweep, Stryker thought with savage exultance. Not one of them left to report to Duffield and Bromley now.

And then he saw the two sharpshooters, who had brought this bloody game to such an abrupt ending, one mounted, roping the riderless and unhurt horse for the other, who was afoot.

"By all that's holy!" breathed Stryker. "It's Selby—*and Goff!*"

He was correct, even at that distance. It was Selby and with him, Goff, like a man returned from the dead. They rode in shortly and explained the miracle. Late yesterday afternoon, Goff had lost his horse in a sudden stampede of cattle, barely escaping with his own life by catching a branch and swinging aloft into a tree.

Alone and helpless on foot, faced with freezing to death before he could reach shelter, Goff had spent a night of horror burrowed deep into a mass of dead steers, kept alive by the warmth of their bodies. He was still a ghastly sight, crusted all over with frozen blood, but Goff was uninjured and very much alive.

"The luckiest damn Dutchman that ever drew breath!" Goff said, grinning all over his square grimy beard-stubbled face. "But I'm sure goin' to hate cow critters from now on, and I never want to eat any more beef."

"How come?" demanded Selby. "The poor beasts saved your worthless life, Dutch."

"Maybe that's it," Goff said. "I'd feel like a cannibal if I ever ate beef again."

They made a crypt for Fulbright in the boulders, secure against wolves and coyotes and vultures, and went on after the herd. They had lost three good men, but they had exacted some measure of payment in six enemy lives, and there were still six of them to hold Goshen Hole against the armed hordes of Crown-D and Anvil-B, the gun-fighters of Duffield and Bromley.

The bulk of their cattle was ahead of them, nearing the sheltered rimrock confines of Goshen Hole, watered by Horse Creek. Wire and fence posts were cached away by the South Pass, toward which the vast herds of the wealthy ranchers would soon be moving, if not already.

It was going to be a strange Christmas Eve, a most unusual Christmas, but they were six men welded closer than blood brothers, by battle and the hardest kind of work, by striving and suffering and death.

Dan Stryker couldn't think of any men he'd rather be with, any time or anywhere in the world. And only one woman—Carol Duffield.

## CHAPTER IV

### BLOCKADE!

DUSK was saffron-streaked lavender deepening to purple and blue-black, weird over the broken white landscape, hushed now that the wind and snow had lulled. As they neared their objective, Dan Stryker and Mark Blasser were scouting ahead of the herd, while Tom Morton strung out his lead steers and kept the point moving. Goff and Selby rode swing on the flanks, and young Rhoads was chanting away as he prodded the lame chilled drag along:

"Hi yi, git along cow critters, git along! Goshen Hole's your Bethlehem and your manger. You'll sleep warm tonight, steers. There's always some kinda graze in Goshen, always water in Horse Creek. Never winter in the Hole, so roll along, you dogies. Ramble on, you steers!"

The cold pressed down like a brutal iron weight on the world, torturing men and beasts alike. There was a stout log cabin at the mouth of North Pass, and no signs of life or habitation about it. No smoke from the stovepipe, no lights, no fresh tracks. The gate to Goshen was open, and the weary decimated herds from the Rawhide were going to plod through unchallenged, into the sanctuary of the sunken hill-girded bowl.

Stryker and Blasser rode past the log house, slitted eyes peering under frosty eyelashes and brows. Colts cocked and ready in gloved hands. The Pass was open and untenanted, the way was clear. They turned back and pulled up before the cabin. Stryker forced a shout from his aching lungs and throat:

"Bring 'em up, Tom! Let 'em roll!"

Morton led the point by, and Stryker yelled: "Take 'em in a ways, Tom. Then drop back here." Selby and Goff worked the swing into the passage, and went along with the herd. Young Rhoads grinned and saluted gayly as he pushed the drag past. And the dusky air was suddenly screaming with lead slugs, as shots ripped and torched from the windows in the log walls.

What a damn fool I was, for not making sure, Stryker thought bitterly.

His gray gelding bucked violently, and Stryker heard the impact of the bullet in solid horseflesh. Rearing and whirling, screaming with a high human note of anguish, the gelding fell over backward. Stryker kicked out of the stirrups and hurled himself clear, rolling in soft trampled snow beside the trail, clawing his sixgun out of the cold-stiffened leather holster, trying to regain his balance.

Fire was still jetting from the cabin, the shots snarling through brush and fir boughs, furrowing up fountains of snow. The gray horse landed threshing beside Stryker, and subsided into stillness. Stryker crawled close to that great body for protection.

RHOADS, hit in the back with the first burst of shooting, wheeled his mount in a wild reckless charge at the log house, his Colt flaring and shattering window-glass. Another slug caught him, lifting the boy from the saddle, dropping him loosely asprawl, inert and lifeless looking in the snowy trail.

Mark Blasser, still in the leather and slamming shots at the cabin, circled it at a wide gallop. Stryker heard Mark's gun blasting from behind the structure, with another weapon answering from inside.

Only two of them, estimated Stryker. They've got more nerve than sense, to jump six of us. But that building is a regular damned fort.

From the shelter of his dead horse, Stryker watched and waited, holding his fire, wanting them to think he was finished.

Apparently they did think so. With the guns still racketing at the rear, the front door opened and a long thin figure slipped outside, starting around after Blasser. It was Symes Skowron of Anvil, swift and sinuous as a snake, his small ugly head thrusting forward as he slithered toward the far corner. Stryker rose into a balanced crouch, calling:

"This way, Symes."

Skowron spun and fired blindly. Stryker leveled off and squeezed the trigger, the big .44 kicking up in his hand, the flame roaring and leaping along the front of the logs. Skowron jerked back from the shocking blow of the bullet, grunting and coughing, leaning lank and helpless on the wall, beaked face against the wood.

Stryker lined his gun and let go again. Symes Skowron writhed like a broken-backed reptile, heaved backward off the logs, twisting and stretching full length in the snow.

Striding over the dead horse, Dan Stryker drove straight at the half-open door, bursting through it at full speed, and lunging across the floor toward the big burly gunman at the back window. Bull Keeshan was hit just as he turned to meet Stryker, one of Blasser's bullets breaking his right shoulder, his gun-hand hanging limp and useless as he lurched about.

But Keeshan was always a fighter, and his huge left hand went to the gun sheathed on his left leg. Stryker picked

up the table in midroom and smashed it against the giant, spoiling his draw, battering him back on the wall, pinning him momentarily there.

Leaping instantly after him, Stryker slashed his gun-barrel down across that large reddish head. Keeshan bowed under the terrific stroke, his knees jacking. But wounded and stunned as he was, Bull Keeshan went on tugging at his left-hand gun, massive shoulders braced against the logs, eyes inflamed and murderous.

Setting his feet, Stryker whipped his left fist into that brute-face, bashing the broken nose and contemptuous mouth, driving Keeshan's skull into the log-wall. The Bull stumbled forward, swaying and groaning, his immense vitality holding him up somehow.

Stryker hooked another left solidly home. Keeshan reeled back in a stilted spraddle-legged stagger, his shoulders crashing through the window-pane, his heavy hips catching on the sill.

He was rocking there, blood pouring down his face and drenching his riddled right shoulder, left hand dragging at the gun-butt, when Mark Blasser fired a final shot from the outer darkness. Bull Keeshan plunged forward from the window, fell headlong, and squirmed over on to his broad back. Still fighting and defiant, full of hatred and venom, Keeshan sneered, a grotesque bloody grimace, and wheezed out his last words:

"Thanks—for bringin' us—your cattle. Lute and Big John—sure will appreciate —that."

THEN he was dead, and outside in the snow young Rhoads and Skowron were dead, and it seemed to Dan Stryker that the whole winter world stank of blood and gunpowder and death. And it wasn't over yet.

Mark Blasser came in the front door and stood looking from Keeshan's bulk to Stryker's gaunt weathered face. "Why didn't you shoot him, Dan?"

"I don't know, Mark," said Stryker honestly.

Blasser shrugged his wide shoulders and hauled Keeshan's body outside, depositing it beside Skowron's. The others came galloping back up the trail, after leaving the herd, anxious and worried, stricken hard by the loss of Rhoads but thankful to find Stryker and Blasser alive and well.

They buried Rhoads in a shallow temporary grave, and removed the other two bodies some distance away. They built a fire, cared for the horses, cleaned and restored the cabin to order, and stuffed the broken windows with towsacking.

The Anvil men had left plenty of provisions—beef, potatoes, bread, butter, coffee, and canned goods, as well as whiskey. They had a few drinks, and quiet efficient Tom Morton set about cooking a real big supper, with the assistance of Selby.

They were all ravenously hungry, of course, and even Dutch Goff devoured the beef steaks with relish and satisfaction.

Afterward, they smoked, rested luxuriously in the warmth, and drank some more whiskey in honor of Christmas Eve. They even tried singing a few carols, but it wasn't much of a success without Rhoads' pure young voice. And Stryker, Blasser, and Morton were preoccupied with the task that lay ahead of them.

"We'd better get that wire up in the South Pass tonight, Dan," said Mark Blasser.

"I reckon we had," agreed Stryker somberly.

"The sky's clearing," Tom Morton remarked from a blanket-draped window. "And there's going to be a moon tonight."

"Is that good—or bad?" asked Selby.

"Both," Dan Stryker said, with a wry grave smile.

"They'll have somebody down there, won't they?" Goff inquired.

Stryker inclined his bronze, gold-glinting head. "Includin' Hackett and Lauck—I hope."

THE night was warmer, the knife-edge of the air blunted and softened, a crescent moon high and bright in the luminous blue, shedding silvery radiance over the white-glittering December earth,

when the five Rawhide riders reached South Pass. The stars were sharp as frosty steel points in the clear sky, as they approached the narrow passage through which Horse Creek had cut the ridges into Goshen Hole.

The log line house here was larger than the one at the northern entrance, standing with a frame barn on a shelf overlooking the trail. This time they made sure that nobody was hiding in either structure, and Stryker thought they could thank the holiday for that.

The Crown and Anvil gun-hands were probably celebrating in Cheyenne. The big ranchers would be wining, dining, and dancing in the Inter-Ocean Hotel and the Cheyenne Club, or loading costly presents on Christmas trees at home.

Leaving their horses in the barn, they appropriated additional and essential tools —picks, spades, shovels, crowbars, mauls, and hammers. Stripping off their heavy outer jackets, they uncovered the cached rolls of wire and long, pointed posts, and went to work in the moonlight, maintaining a watchful lookout to the south.

The frozen stony soil made the digging of post holes a difficult and tedious operation, but the men worked hard, fast, and doggedly, sweating freely in the winter night, and finally planting the wooden uprights, deep and solid.

Stryker and Blasser, the biggest and strongest, spelled one another at the sledging. The wire, rigid from the cold, was cumbersome and maddening to handle, but they managed to unroll and string it, hammer it securely to one pole after another.

It was a long slow job though, and hours before it was completed they heard the faint rumbling movement of a vast herd in the distance, the thin bawling and wailing of driven stock. That blizzard, striking the southerly ranges, had brought about an earlier drive than planned on. Christmas or not, the beef of Anvil, Crown, and the other great spreads, was on its way to the winter graze and shelter of Goshen.

And the riders from the Rawhide were barely in time with their wire blockade. Rough on the innocent cattle, but the only possible chance of forcing Big John Duffield and Lute Bromley into a compromising agreement, that would permit the Rawhide herds to winter safely in the Hole.

Toward morning a wind came up, whipping icily from the north, and with it came more snow and scudding black clouds, that quickly blotted out the myriad stars and the curved sliver blade of the moon. The temperature dropped rapidly under the darkening heavens, and the men withdrew to the barn to rest briefly, drink whiskey from canteens, and don buffalo and sheepskin jackets, now that the hardest labor was done.

Stryker, puffing wearily on a cigarette, stroked the neck of young Rhoads' chestnut mare, which he was riding since the death of his gray gelding. Tom Morton went into the cabin to build up a fire, anticipating the urgent need of one, once their grilling chore was done.

"Come on, let's string the rest of it," Dutch Goff said, with a final warming swig from his canteen. "I'd rather work than lay back dreadin' it."

The other four went out to finish the task, while Morton was kindling his fire in the log-house. The skies were graying and lightening now, with the approach of morning, but the wind was roaring with greater velocity than ever, scourging the men along the fence with sleet and snow.

They were on the alert for an enemy vanguard from the south, but rather heedless of any menace from the interior of Goshen Hole to the north.

## CHAPTER V

### The Fence at South Pass

GOFF was nailing the final strand to the last post at the far canyon wall, with Selby holding the wire taut for him, while Stryker and Blasser gathered up the tools. Gunfire blasted from behind them, flattened and muted under the vicious scream of the gale.

Dutch Goff pitched forward, groaning and cursing in disgust, and hung slackly on the fence. Selby spun, drew, and fired once before the lead found him, beating him back on to the wire, spilling him at the foot of it.

Stryker and Blasser dropped the tools and dived for the nearest scant cover of low hummocks, drawing their guns and watching the lurid muzzle flashes streak elongated down the wind toward them. They were pinned down, helpless, with at least five rifles blazing away at them, the close shriek of bullets keeping them tight to the snowy ground. Goff was still hanging on the wire in a stark crucified attitude, and Selby sprawled silently at his feet.

Tom Morton came out the cabin door, a crouched slender figure, and opened up with his carbine, firing swiftly and calmly into the teeth of the storm, diverting the enemy attack to himself. Up the trail a man yelled in pain, and tumbled down a brush-covered slope.

Morton went on levering, aiming and splintering windows. Quiet, methodical, steady as ever, Tom Morton was, and from below Stryker and Blasser chimed in with their sixguns now.

But it was Tom Morton's Winchester that broke the back of the assault, and put the enemy to rout. Another dark figure reared up behind a boulder, and fell face-down across it, humped loosely in death.

With a final fusillade that drove Tom back inside the house, the other three assailants broke and scattered, scrambling for the cover of the barn. Stryker and Blasser, on their feet and moving forward, lined running shots at the last man, who went down suddenly as if tripped, skidding headlong in the snow, and lay crumpled at the base of a cedar trunk.

Two of them left, and even in that vauge gusty light, Stryker was certain those two were the tall lank Hackett and the short squat Lauck, Duffield's ace gunmen. Leaning into the wind and stumbling through snowdrifts, Stryker and Blasser

**AS HEALER.** One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"
**AS LUCK BRINGER.** Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"
**AS MATCHMAKER.** A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."
**AS PRIZEWINNER.** A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . , who won £2,000 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK?

**JOAN THE WAD**

is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health Wealth and Happiness.

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**AS SPECULATOR.** A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

All you have to do is to send a 1s. stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to

**27 JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN**

went after them. And downtrail, beyond the new fence, the lead steers of Crown and Anvil were already looming darkly in the chill grayness of early morning.

Lucky Lauck, weighed down by fat and exhausted from struggling through snowbanks, floundered heavily against the barn door and fumbled at the handle. The door stuck, frozen slightly in place, and the panting sobbing Lauck pushed away from it and lifted his gun.

But Mark Blasser threw down and drilled him twice through the plump middle, and Lauck's last shot exploded harmlessly into the air, as he doubled up and fell like a huge ungainly frog, stubby limbs jerking spasmodically, never moving again.

HACKETT had rounded the far corner of the barn. Dan Stryker said, "This one's mine, Mark," and went striding on after him, calling aloud: "Come on, Hack. Just you and me!" He paused at the edge of the building and listened intently. Dimly, under the wind, he could hear the rasped agony of Hackett's breathing in the shelter of the board wall.

"What's the matter, Hack?—afraid?"

"I'm waitin'," Hackett shouted back. "Come and get me if you can, big boy!"

Stryker reloaded his Colt, leaving his gloves tucked in under his belt, wanting his hands bare, free and unencumbered for this fight, even in the freezing cold. Stryker found a dead stick and thrust his fur cap beyond the cornice. A shot snatched it immediately from the stick.

Stryker hit the snow in a long flat dive, sliding past the corner, firing from the ground just as flame blossomed from Hackett's hand.

Stryker rolled quickly and came lithely on to his feet, thumbing off another fast shot. Hackett slumped against the side of the structure, gasping and moaning, trying to lift his drooping gun-hand, blasting into the earth between them, spraying Stryker's boots wetly.

Stryker turned loose his Colt .44 once more, holding it firm in his right hand, fanning the hammer with the heel of his left palm, thinking bitterly of all the good men who had died in this senseless war. Flame spurted in torrents, the reports blending thunderously, and Hackett's lanky form rocked and twisted with the slashing impacts, that tore him off the planks, twirled him like a tall disjointed puppet, and flung him at last face-down and shot to pieces in the snow.

Wheeling wearily, spent and sick and numb, drained of all emotion, Dan Stryker plodded around to the front of the barn, nodding slowly to Blasser and Morton, walking on toward the cabin.

The other two men went out after Goff and Selby, with the point of that herd coming closer in the wan smoking light beneath the storm. Dutch Goff, who had come back from the dead once, was really gone this time, but Selby was only wounded, with a chance of pulling through. Tom Morton did the best he could for the boy, who was mercifully unconscious, while Mark Blasser gathered up all the weapons, with Stryker checking and reloading them.

Then there was nothing to do but wait, drink the whiskey they sorely needed, and watch the Crown and Anvil Cattle surge on toward that fence in the South Pass, on this bleak and ghastly Christmas morning. The cabin was snug and warm, but it seemed as if a score of men were missing, and the sound of Selby's painful breathing was like a file across their raw fretted nerves.

Looking at Blasser and Morton, Stryker saw that they had aged years in the past two days and nights, and he knew that his own bronze-stubbled sunken-cheeked face must look even older, more worn, wasted, and haggard than theirs.

IN the first, faint, faraway glow of dawn, lemon-colored and unearthly in the east, the lead steers were jammed against the wire barricade, bawling and lowing plaintively, fighting the fence and one another, pressed inexorably forward by the massed weight of the herd behind them. Some were already entangled and crippled, freezing and moaning, while

others were down, trampled and crushed to death.

On either side of the defile, cursing raging riders fought to hold the herd and ease the pressure, firing futile shots at the log cabin from time to time.

Stryker and Blasser, carbines in hand, were watching the dammed-up tidal wave of beef in South Pass, when Tom Morton spoke from a window on the north side of the house: "Somebody coming out of the Hole. Looks like a woman and a young kid."

Then he swore softly, an unusual thing for Tom to do. "Why, it's Carol Duffield and Young Mac—McMinn's boy from Laramie!"

In a few minutes they were inside the cabin, Carol in Stryker's arms, the Mcminn boy shaking hands and explaining to Morton and Blasser. "They brought Dad's body into town, and Miss Carol wanted to ride out here. So I rode along with her. Is there goin' to be any more fightin'?" There was a hopeful note in his choked youthful voice.

"We hope not, son,' 'said Tom Morton gently.

"Well, I see you got quite a few of 'em, anyway," Young Mac said.

Stryker was saying to the girl: "You shouldn't have come all the way out here, Carol."

"I had to, Dan," she said simply. "I had to see if you were all right. And I wanted to be with you to celebrate Christmas."

"Some Christmas," said Stryker, shaking his high tawny head. "You might have got lost and frozen, Carol—both of you."

"We knew the trail, and we dressed for it," Carol told him. "It wasn't too bad last night, Dan."

"Warm up by the fire," Stryker advised. "We'll take care of your horses for you."

"I'll get them, Dan," said Morton, and went out to do so.

"Dad never had a chance, I guess," the McMinn boy said, bravely trying to sound matter-of-fact. "Hit three times, only fired one shot. I figure he was bush-whacked."

"Don't think about it, kid," Stryker said. "Mac died brave. He was a good man."

Young Mac swallowed and nodded. "Can I have his job, Dan? I'm big enough to work now."

Stryker patted his head. "You sure can, Young Mac." And he was glad they had taken the money from those Crown and Anvil bodies. The considerable sum would be a great help to the McMinn and Fulbright families.

"Hey, Dan," Mark Blasser called from a south window. "Big John Duffield and Lute Bromley both just rode in down there."

DUFFIELD'S foghorn bellow reached them a moment later: "You in the shack, come out and talk! There won't be any more of this shootin'—not for awhile yet."

"We'll talk from here," Stryker yelled back through a broken window. "What you want?"

"You, Stryker? Damn your soul! Get that wire fence down. Cattle are dyin' on it."

"How do you like it, John? Our cattle died on your fences. We want to bargain with you. Our herds stay in Goshen Hole."

"Bargain, hell! You're goin' to hang for this, if you live that long!" roared Duffield. "My crew'll circle round over the hills and blow that flimsy little shanty apart."

"No, they won't. We've got dynamite here. Enough to blast your whole herd and crew. Hackett and Lauck are dead, Duffield. Keeshan and Skowron and a lot of others, too. You goin' to be reasonable?"

Duffield and the fat Bromley conferred hastily. Big John shouted through cupped hands: "All right, all right, cut the wire! We can't get to it."

"Our cattle can winter in the Hole, then?"

"Yes, dammit, yes! Just rip that fence down, Stryker. Good beef's dyin' every minute!"

"Put it in writin', you and Bromley sign it," ordered Stryker.

John Duffield pulled out a notebook, scribbled rapidly, and passed it to Lute Bromley for his signature.

"Send a man up with it," Stryker commanded, hoarse with yelling.

"And have him murdered there?" howled Duffield.

Carol stepped quickly out of the door, and moved into plain view of her father and the others below in the cattle-choked passage. Even at that distance, the shocked astonishment of Big John and his followers was discernible.

"There won't be any more killing," Carol Duffield announced clearly. "I'll take that paper from your rider, and I'll see that the agreement holds."

"Carol! What are you doin' with that bunch of riff-raff killers?"

"Your gunmen started it, Dad. Now there are thirteen dead from Crown and Anvil. Five dead, one wounded, from the Rawhide. That's enough, more than enough. Any more fighting and I'll be in it—on this side! Are you willing to make peace?"

Her father gestured helplessly. "Yes, Carol, yes. There won't be any more fightin'. Make 'em cut that fence, Carol, for the love of God!"

"Pull off your steers and we'll cut it," Stryker shouted. "Hold 'em back, don't let 'em stampede, or we'll use the dynamite."

Big John Duffield barked out at his riders, and they rode in from either side, lashing at the brute heads and muzzles to force them back from the wire, shooting the animals they couldn't handle any other way.

A LONE man on foot was clambering awkwardly up the steep wall of the Pass, and working his way forward in thigh-deep drifts toward the log house on the shelf. Carol Duffield met him, accepted and studied her father's written statement, waved the messenger back, and returned to the cabin, handing Stryker the paper.

"It will hold, Dan," she said. "I'll see that it does."

"I sure hope so," Stryker drawled. "It's a good thing you came out here, Cary—after all."

Tom Morton came back from the barn with the wire-cutters, smiling soberly and shaking his brown head. "I hope you boys haven't forgotten how to use these instruments."

Mark Blasser sighed, his square jaws chewing slowly on his tobacco. "Seems like all we do is cut fences and make fences."

"I'd rather cut 'em than make 'em," Stryker said. "A nice peaceful pastime."

"Aw, you musta done plenty of fightin', too," Young Mac maintained stoutly, eyeing them with pride.

"That's over with, son," said Stryker. "For good we hope. No more war and no more fences on the open range. A better country for kids to grow up in."

Carol Duffield was kneeling by the bunk in the corner bathing and putting a fresh dressing on Selby's wounded side, her coppery red head bent intently.

"It's clean," she said. "He's going to live all right."

Dan Stryker stood tall and rangy, looking down at her with a deep soft light in his tired gray eyes, a grave thankful smile on the weather-whipped leanness of his angular bronzed face.

"I reckon we'll all live and everythin'll be fine," Stryker said slowly. "With a woman like you on the Rawhide, Cary. And a hand like Young Mac here."

"Unless we all go to jail," Tom Morton remarked casually.

Carol arose and turned the full glory of her green eyes and smiling face on Dan Stryker. "There's a government man in Laramie. Those fences and claims are illegal, except those claims that are homesteaded, like yours. I told him the whole story. He saw Mac, and he knows you were fighting in self-defense. It's Crown and Anvil who will face judgment, not you men from Rawhide Creek."

She moved easily toward Stryker, and the others became discreetly absorbed in the activity outside in South Pass.

THE END

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HAVE YOU SUFFERED FROM NEURASTHENIA OR NERVE STRAIN?

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# SLIPPERY JIM

## By JOSEPH STOCKER

*Sly Climax Jim was a master of evasion—from the grasp of the law*

THEY called him Climax Jim, among other things, although his real name was Rufus Nephews. Nobody knows where he came from. But out in Arizona, during the 1890's, he had the reputation of being as blithe and slippery an individual as ever rustled a cow or slithered free from a territorial jail.

Once at St. Johns, in the White Mountain country of north-eastern Arizona, Climax decided he'd had enough of the sheriff's hospitality. Squatting on his cot in a jail cell, while two deputies sat guarding him, Climax faked a temper tantrum.

He jerked off his boots and flung them against a wall. He wriggled out of his jacket and sent it hurtling at another wall. He stripped off his blue jeans, then peered warily at his guards. One was tilted back, nodding sleepily. The other sat near the open door of the cell. They were taking little notice of his tomfoolery.

With lightning movement, Climax hurled his blue jeans into the face of one of the officers, bounded to his feet, grabbed up the pants as he swept through the door and vanished into the night.

But he was on foot—a grevious handicap to any aspiring cattle rustler and jail breaker. Late the next evening he limped into the camp of a ranger. He tried to snatch the ranger's horse, but his host covered him with a rifle.

As the ranger told the story many years later—

"It was a cold night, and the fire I had built was getting low. Climax complained that he was cold. He got an armful of brush and threw it on the fire, which blazed high with a surge of smoke that blinded me. When I recovered, Climax had disappeared in the darkness."

Climax was a handsome man, with thick black hair and a heavy moustache. his ample eyebrows were perpetually lowered, as if long years of riding beneath a dazzling Western sun had taught him to use them as shades to shield his eyes. He was never without a plug of chewing tobacco, which he carried underneath his shirt to keep it moist.

In jail or out, he was always an outspoken person. He looked up one day to see the local minister enter his cell as he sat chewing, with obvious irritation, on the stringy beef and moldy bread which the Chinese cook had brought him.

"I came to pray with you," the preacher volunteered.

"Don't pray for me," snorted Climax. "Go back and pray for the sinner who cooked this danged food.

Climax was indicted many times for rustling but was never tried. Somehow the witnesses against him always failed to appear. When he was finally brought to bar, it was not for rustling but on a charge for "kiting" a check. Seems he rustled a dozen steers and sold them at a butcher shop in Clifton. He didn't like the price he got, so he jauntily lofted the check to a more attractive sum, for

which he was in due time nabbed, jailed, and brought to trial.

"There he sits, gentlemen of the jury," fulminated the county attorney, "innocent looking and planning some way to get out of this. But we have got him this time if you do your duty."

An employee at the bank where Climax cashed the check mounted the witness stand and identified Exhibit A—the check itself. The county attorney moved to admit the check as evidence.

Climax leaned over to his lawyer. "Object!" he hissed.

The lawyer leaped up and bellowed his objections. A noisy argument followed. The prosecutor laid the check on the table so he could have both hands free to hammer home his points.

Everybody's attention was on the two barristers. Climax Jim, unnoticed, pulled his chewing tobacco out from beneath his shirt, bit off a chaw and laid the plug on the table near the check. Then, with slow nonchalance, he drew plug and check toward him, slipped the tobacco inside his shirt and the check into his mouth.

Presently the judge ruled that the check was admissible as evidence. As he finished speaking, Climax swallowed. Down went the evidence and with it the case of the Territory versus Climax Jim. Again he had evaded the grasp of the law.

After that Climax quit rustling. He wooed and won a school teacher, staked a claim to a homestead near a new mining camp and, when the value of his property soared, sold out to the mining company for $10,000 and took his wife to California. And that's the last that anybody in Arizona ever heard of him.

Some say Climax Jim made crime pay off well enough to retire. But others have a different theory. They think he was just plumb bored. He had broken out of every jail from Hardscrabble Creek to the Mexican border, and there were no more sheriffs to conquer.

THE END


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# COWBOY, OIL YOUR GUN!

*That was the only choice drifter Easy Marks had—when he became a posse-target in a lead-riddled frameup*

**By BENNETT FOSTER**

# *Stirring Novelette of the Outlaw Trail*

## CHAPTER I

### Posse-Bait Hero

EASY MARKS stopped Warrior at the top of the hill, set himself restfully in the saddle and rolled a cigarette. Warrior, a flea-bitten white, fifteen hands tall, lowered his hammer head and took two deep breaths. Warrior had come thirty swift miles since mid-afternoon. Easy, his bland and smiling face intent on the tobacco and paper in his hand, showed no more strain than the horse. But

somewhere back of Easy there were a number of frustrated and furious gentlemen. A sheriff's posse.

With the cigarette rolled and lighted, Mr. Marks surveyed the valley that lay below him. On the further side he discerned a line of trees, already golden with autumn, that bordered a creek. Beyond the creek a trickle of smoke rose straight into the evening sky. Easy nodded. That would be a house. In this country a house meant horses and at that moment Easy was interested in horses. Warrior, good as he was, could not keep up this gait indefinitely. Easy had many more miles to ride. How many he did not know. His attitude toward the law was one of toleration; he could take it or leave it alone. But the law was after him and for the present he intended to maintain that position; keep it after him, not with him. Back in Dockstader there was a man named Hunt with a slug through his shoulder. Easy had put it there. Mr. Hunt, unable to return the slug, had done the next best thing; he had sent a posse after Easy.

"I reckon," said Easy Marks aloud, "that I'll get you a playmate, Warrior. Just somethin' to trail along with us. The question is, had I better borrow or buy?"

Warrior shifted his weight in answer, and Easy puffed and meditated.

From the valley below a sound sifted up, echoing. Easy straightened and raised his head. Warrior pricked his ears. Both knew that sound, the echo of a shot.

"Sounded kind of mean," Easy commented. "I wonder . . ."

Scanning the valley below, he saw a horse. The animal was as white as Warrior, and as Easy watched, the horse ran from an object that was lumped on the ground. A man down there, off his horse, and the horse running. Easy lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the sun and peered into the valley.

The white horse stepped on a rein, stopped abruptly and stood, head lowered; and then from a clump of cedar to Easy's right, came a rider. He was a full three hundred yards away. Taking his time, the rider went down the slope, stopped beside the fallen man and bent down in his saddle. Then, straightening, he rode over to the white horse. He caught the animal and led him back to where the man lay on the ground. There he dismounted, bent down and caught the fallen man's leg.

"The son-of-a-gun!" muttered Easy. "He's goin' to—whoa, Warrior!"

Warrior, urged by the sharpness in Easy's voice, had made two tentative steps. Easy's big right hand had shifted forward, resting now on the butt of the thirty-thirty that projected conveniently from a scabbard under the right fender. Down below, that second rider was trying to put the fallen man's foot into a stirrup, but the white horse was nervous and made the operation difficult. Easy realized just what he was seeing: the fellow was making sure that the white horse would drag the fallen rider. Easy pulled out his carbine, slid down from Warrior and, levered in a shell and pulled the trigger.

THE report of the thirty-thirty spanked sharply against the quiet. Down below the white horse danced away, the man who rode the bay dropped the foot he held and straightened. Easy lowered his sights a trifle and squeezed off a shot.

"Skunk!" snapped Easy.

Before the second report had rolled away, the rider of the bay was on his horse. He wasted no time but, bending low, sent the bay along. Easy pumped the lever of the Winchester and fired again and again. The carbine was not his forte. With the .45 under his arm he was rather better. A good many men had mistaken the bland and smiling face and the initials E. Z., to mean easy, and so Mr. Marks had been forced to learn the use of the frontier model .45. The man on the bay horse gained the timber and was lost. Easy sent a shot crashing through the cedars, slid the carbine back into its scabbard, and mounting Warrior, went down the hill.

He arrived at the bottom of the slope amid a rattle of rolling stones and dirt. Warrior strung out across the flat intervened, gathered his haunches under him, bunched his feet and slid. Easy came from Warrior like a dropping stone. Bending down over the man on the ground, he reached a hand to the chest the heart beat there was steady. He found the wound, close to the left shoulder, a little high for the heart.

"Mebbe got a lung," muttered Mr. Marks.

The man opened his eyes, stared up at Easy and tried to speak. It was no go.

"Keep quiet!" Easy ordered. "I'll take you in. Just keep still an' don't move."

Light flickered in the man's eyes. Was it a twinkle of amusement? Easy did not know. Rising, he mounted Warrior and went after the white horse of the wounded man.

During the process of getting the man on his horse, blood frothed to the white lips, and the injured man suddenly went limp. Easy did what he could for the wound with neckerchief and strips torn from the man's shirt. The sun was low now, and he had to hurry. At last the white horse, reprimanded and brought down to earth, allowed the burden to be put in place and Easy lashed the man across the saddle. When he had finished he mounted Warrior and set out toward the smoke. He did not know what was under the smoke but he suspected a ranchhouse. Probably the house of this man he had helped. Grimly he hoped it was not the home of the man's assailant. He went as fast as he dared and hoped, with every step the Warrior took, that the man on the other horse would make it. He had liked that fellow's looks.

It was a ranchhouse over across the creek where the cotton woods towered their yellow heads. There were corrals and a barn and sheds and a long, low dwelling with chimneys coming from every room. Easy rode straight to the front, stopped at the porch, and shouted.

Two people came in answer to his call, a boy who limped on a bad leg and a girl dressed in Levi's and boots and shirt, with a bandana tied around her hair. Easy, lifting down the wounded man, said brusquely:

"Help me get him in; he's hurt."

The girl exclaimed: "Uncle Wayne!" There was a gasp and a sob in her voice. Her hand, small and warm and rough with work, caught Easy's hand as he lifted the injured man down. The crippled boy said nothing, but hobbled to open the door. Easy carried his heavy burden into the house.

When he had placed the man on a couch in the living room, he turned to the two. "Get me some clean cloths an' some hot water! Bub, help me get his shirt off."

The girl hurried away, to return with a wash basin, a tea kettle, and a bundle of what must have been dish towels. The boy, under Easy's directions, ripped a shirt sleeve with Easy's sharp stockman's knife, pulled away and cut at underwear. Easy dipped a towel into hot water, washed the blue-rimmed, bloody hole in the back, and folded cloths to make compresses.

When he finished, the girl was trembling, but silent. The wounded man lay inert, swathed with white about his shoulders, his face pallid and his eyes closed. The boy had hobbled away.

"Sister," said Easy watching the girl, "if you've got a drink of liquor around here you'd better get it. You need one. You— What's up, sonny?"

THE boy stood by the door, a big Sharps in his hands, the muzzle pointed at Easy's chest. "You shot him," he said, and his lips trembled. "You shot Uncle Wayne!"

"Would I have brought him in?" asked Easy calmly. "Son, you're off on the wrong foot."

"Bill!" The girl's voice was scandalized. "Bill—"

Bill lowered the Sharps. It was a nice

gun. Easy could see that. A well kept, well cared-for gun. "Mebbe," said Easy, "you'd better tell me what this is about." He spoke gently.

"Who are you?" Little Bill lowered the Sharps but still held it in his hands. Little Bill, one of these days, would do to take along. Easy saw that.

"My name is Marks," Easy answered. "Easy Marks, some call me. I was on top of the hill and saw your uncle drop from his horse. I heard a shot and a man rode out and tried to put your uncle's boot in a stirrup. I reckon he figured to have that white horse drag him. I butted in then an' the other fellow left an' I got your uncle on his horse an' brought him in."

"What are you doin' around here?" Little Bill was about fourteen, maybe fifteen, and pretty much of a man. The muzzle of the Sharps had come up again. The girl, face white, took a hasty step, putting herself between Bill and Easy.

"Bill!" she warned.

Easy scratched his head. He did not want to be shot by that big Sharps. But there was no chance of getting the gun without hurting the kid.

The girl took the play. "Bill," she said, "he helped Uncle Wayne. He brought him in. "He—"

Little Bill lowered the Sharps again. "Well—" he said uncertainly.

Easy felt the tension go, and he grinned. That open-faced, friendly grin had gotten Easy a number of things: a friend or two and some money in a few poker games, and a few bets against Warrior in a quarter-mile race. "I've introduced myself," he suggested.

The girl took a step forward. "I'm Sally Wilkins," she said. "This is my brother, Bill. The man you brought in is my uncle, Wayne McLean. He came over to help us after father was killed. He—" She could go no further, and suddenly she swayed on her feet. Easy took one long step, scooped her up in his arms. She was light, almost fragile in his arms. Easy's face was gentle.

"Bill," he said, "you'll have to show me where to put her."

Little Bill set the Sharps beside the door and limped across the room. "In here," he directed. "Mister—" Then he broke.

"Easy, Bill," said Marks. "Take it easy, kid, she's all right."

Little Bill put his face against the door and sobbed. Easy carried Sally Wilkins into a bedroom, a very feminine bedroom, and put her on the bed. He was looking anxiously down at her when he heard the boy's voice.

"I was—It's just that Sally is—"

"Sure," comforted Easy. "Sure, Bill. If you'd rustle some whiskey we'd get her around in no time. An' Bill—"

Little Bill paused beside the door.

"Is there a doctor in this country?" asked Easy gravely. "I reckon we're goin' to need one here."

"In Dockstader," answered the boy, with more confidence.

Easy grimaced. "You're goin' to have company from Dockstader shortly," he said. "I reckon one of them can go for a doctor. I've got to be pushin' along, Bill."

Little Bill's face lost its steady look, and his lips began to quiver.

"But not yet," amended Easy quickly. "Not yet awhile. Bill, you rustle that liquor."

Little Bill hobbled away.

WHEN he came back carrying a dusty bottle, Easy was at the door. "Loosen up her shirt, Bill," he said. "Give her a drink. I'm goin' out to your uncle."

Little Bill hobbled into the bedroom and Easy went to the couch. The man who lay there had not moved. Now, as Easy approached, the eyelids raised and there was a question in those brown eyes as they stared up at Easy.

"You're all right," said Easy lying. "I brought you in. You ain't hurt bad."

"The kids." The man's voice was so

faint that Easy had to bend down to catch the words.

"They're all right," assured Easy. "Takin' it fine."

"Stay with 'em," Wayne McLean barely whispered the words. "They—

"Sure," promised Easy, disregarding a man named Hunt, and a posse, "Sure I'll stay."

The brown eyes closed. Easy, bending down, felt for the thread of pulse. It was there, faint but steady. Little Bill came back from the bedroom.

"Sis is—" began Little Bill, and then catching sight of the man on the bed, "Is he—?"

"No," assured Easy. "Bill, I reckon you'll have to help me some. You an' yo're sister."

Little Bill put down the whiskey bottle. Sally Wilkins, face still white, appeared in the doorway and steadied herself against the door jamb.

"There's goin' to be a bunch of men along here pretty soon," Easy said gravely. "They're goin' to be lookin' for me. It would be mighty bad if they found me. You see, I shot a man back in Dock-Stader."

Little Bill's mouth opened, but he took the announcement in silence.

"Now I can't leave here," said Easy. "There's you an' your sister—"

"You must go!" Sally Wilkins interposed. "You mustn't put yourself in danger because of us. We can manage alone."

Easy grinned and shook his head. "My horse can't go any further," he said, though Warrior was good for fifty miles more. "I've got to stay. Now here's what you do. We'll turn Warrior out an' hide my saddle. I reckon I can crawl into the barn or someplace. When these fella's come, you send one of 'em to town for a doctor. The rest will likely branch out lookin' for the man who shot your uncle. There'll be enough excitement to keep 'em goin'. Tomorrow when somebody that you send for, gets here, I'll slip away. Will you help me?"

Little Bill was first to answer. "Sure," he said. "You stay here, Sis. I'll show you where to put your horse, Mr.—"

"Easy," said Easy Marks. "Just call me that. I reckon you can tell the sheriff when he comes that your uncle made it to here an' you fixed him up. I'll be right with you, Bill."

## CHAPTER II

### Return of the Hunted

EASY was in the barn when the expected posse made its appearance. He was hidden in the loft, his saddle and gear secreted under a thin pile of hay. He would have been disappointed if the posse had not come. Four or five hours ago he would have sworn at himself for failing to hide a trail; now he praised the ability of these men from Dockstader to follow sign. They were welcome here at the Wilkin's place all right. Easy heard the riders arrive and heard the rumble of their voices. Then just outside the barn he heard voices again, clear and distinct now.

"You can get a fresh horse at Hornblow's. You light a shuck for town and get Doc Gibbon started. I don't know if McLean's goin' to make it or not, but it wouldn't look right if we didn't get Doc out here."

"It's a mighty long ride to make for Wayne McLean, if you ask me," another voice said. There was a snarl in that voice and easy promised himself that he would remember it. "I thought you wanted him out of the way, Douglas."

"What I want is none of your business!" The man named Douglas made the point clear. "Light a shuck, Curly."

"Then you ain't goin' on after that Marks fella?"

"No. This is about the county line an' we'll drop it here. Damn him, anyway! I wish he'd shot straighter."

Easy placed the speaker. This fellow was Lester Douglas. Easy had been introduced to Douglas by a bartender in Dockstader. It had been Douglas who invited him to sit in on the poker game. Easy bent forward over the hay chute, ears alert.

"Jabe don't wish that," said Curly, a little humor in his voice. "Jabe Hunt is blame glad he got that slug through the shoulder instead of through the brisket."

"It hardly laid Hunt up. You pull out for town, Curly. Likely Burnside will stick here until mornin' an' then scout around to see who took a crack at McLean. Go along."

The voices went away and Easy settled back, reviewing what he had heard in his mind. Les Douglas; Easy pictured the man, smooth-shaven, compact, pleasant-faced. Eyes just a little too close together, just a little too narrow; eyebrows a little too heavy, mouth a little too thin. Easy had picked Douglas as the man to watch in the poker game. He had been more than surprised when it was Hunt turned up with four kings after he, Easy, had discarded one, trying to make a full house. And yet Hunt had looked all right. In the darkness Easy scowled. Now how could the fourth king have gotten into Hunt's hand without his putting it there? Hunt had drawn two cards—and— There was some little incident in that poker game, something that had happened before the argument with Hunt, that he should remember.

But he couldn't.

Time wore on. Easy shifted cramped muscles, and made the loft floor creak. He could see through a crack in the side of the barn that lights still blazed in the house. That was natural. Feet sounded on the hard packed earth outside the barn, stopped, and a voice said: "We'll go along in the mornin'. No use for stickin' around here. That Marks fella is in the next county by now."

"Then you don't think he shot McLean?" That was another man. Easy had recognized the voice of the first speaker. It was Burnside, the sheriff; Easy had met him in Dockstader.

"No," said Burnside, "I don't. What did he want to shoot McLean for? All he wanted to do was put miles behind him. If I'm any judge of a horse, he's still doin it. I liked that white."

Easy warmed toward the sheriff.

"Where we goin' in the mornin'?" demanded Burnside's companion.

"Down to Hornblow's."

"You think that mebbe Oscar—"

"I'm goin' to ask Oscar where he was," stated the officer. He'll bear lookin' into."

The man with the sheriff said, "Umm," slowly as though he agreed, and then spoke again, changing the subject. "I sure didn't get much supper. I'm sure awful gant."

"They ain't got much," said Burnside. "I guess the girl gave us the best she had. What with everythin' mortgaged to Hunt an' the expense they've had, the Wilkinses are about broke."

"An' McLean ain't much cowman." The sheriff's companion seemed to want to thresh it all out for Easy's benefit. "He ain't—"

"Let's go to the house," interrupted Burnside.

THE two went away and Easy relaxed again, taking due precautions concerning the squeaking board. It may have been that he slept. At any event he was brought to startled wakefulness by a whisper from below.

"Easy!"

The board squeaked as Easy shifted, and Little Bill said "Ssh," petulantly.

"What is it, Bill?" whispered Easy.

"They're goin' to stay the night," the boy answered. "Burnside is sittin' up with Uncle Wayne. The rest of 'em are sleepin' You got to go before it gets daylight. They'll ketch you if you don't."

Easy had been of the same opinion himself. He had already decided to get out of the barn at dawn, find Warrior, and pull

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## HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

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out. Little Bill had turned Warrior into the horse pasture, but Easy knew his horse. Come morning, Warrior would be close to the house looking for grain. He would come at Easy's whistle, too, if that was needed.

"Sally has got my horse out back for you," continued Little Bill. "You take him an' slope. If they find you—"

Easy dug his gear out of the hay. He had no intention of going very far away from the Wilkinses, but he could see the sense of Little Bill's ideas. It would not do for him to be in the barn loft in the morning. It would only make trouble for the kids. The only reason he had stayed at all was on the chance that the following posse would not strike this spot.

In the blackness behind the barn Sally Wilkins was waiting. The girl shivered as Easy and her brother joined her. Her arm was slight under Easy's hand. "Nicker is in the corral," said Sally.

"You better let me catch him," suggested Little Bill. "He knows me." His limping figure made a black spot in the blackness.

Sally whispered to Easy. "Nicker fell with Bill. "That's when he broke his knee. Bill has been fooling with him ever since he got so he could walk at all. He—"

The girl stopped. Little Bill was coming back, leading the black horse.

Easy saddled by sense of touch. The horse stood quiet, but from the feel of him he was a considerable horse. Easy finished with his latigos, tested the stirrup and twisted it out. He reached a hand to Little Bill. "You—" said Easy awkwardly. "I'll see you, Bill, an' thanks!" Little Bill shook hands. It meant something, the boy giving Easy his pet horse.

"You helped out considerable," said Little Bill, as though he were fifty years old and a cowman. "I wish— Well, thanks for bringing in Uncle Wayne."

Sally Wilkins was beside Easy, her shoulder close against him. He felt her stiffen, and then his arm was around her and he was bending down in the darkness. For an instant her lips lingered against his; but before he could speak she had broken away and disappeared silently. Then he was up in the saddle, with Nicker moving under him, and as he urged the horse to a gallop a minute or two later he was still wondering what had made him think Sally Wilkins was just a kid. She and Little Bill thought he was leaving them—he grinned to himself. It would take a good deal to stop him from going back there in the morning.

MORNING, cold and gray and cloudless, found Easy up on the hill that he had come down the evening before. That was as good a place as any, Easy believed. Surely the posse would not retrace their trail. They might come to the spot where McLean had been hit, but Easy doubted that. McLean could not talk, and, riding in the night before, Burnside's men must have obliterated the tracks that Easy and McLean had made. Easy could not see the house—it was hidden by the creek and the trees. Still he watched, and when smoke came from the chimney he would know that the small posse was moving.

While he waited Easy had an idea. The man that had shot McLean must have left some sign. Easy took the black horse down the slope.

He liked black Nicker. Nicker was gentle enough and fool-proof, but plenty of horse just the same. Pretty nearly as much horse as Warrior. Down at the foot of the hill Easy looked toward the house, saw no smoke, and set off toward the cedar clump.

He found the horse tracks in the cedar clump and the brass shell of a .38-.55. That was the shell that had wounded McLean. Easy put it in his pocket. Riding on beyond the cedars, he saw where the drygulcher had swung south, toward Dockstader, and then lost the trail. It would have taken a cross between an Apache and a bloodhound to follow the sign across the malpai rim that cropped and sloped toward the hilltop. Easy went

back to the cedars and watched the creek for his smoke sign.

He could see the posse in the valley he had left. The men were working along through it, slowly unraveling a track. Easy watched them gather together and consult, then ride in a compact little group back toward the southwest.

He came across the malpai and circled north so that when he rode in to the Wilkins' place he came through the horse pasture. There was a buckboard in the yard in front of the ranchhouse. Evidently the doctor had arrived. A saddled horse beside the buckboard told of more company Easy stayed in the trees along the creek and waited. Presently a man came out, mounted the horse, and loped away down the creek. That would be a posse member that Burnside had left to bring word about Wayne McLean. Still Easy waited. He saw Little Bill come out on the porch and stand staring off toward the south, and then Sally and a short, heavy man joined the boy. The two stood and talked, the short man gesticulating with his hands. At last the short man went down the steps, climbing into the buckboard and driving out of the yard. When the vehicle struck the creek-crossing, Easy directed Nicker toward the house. The doctor was out of sight when he reached the ranchhouse.

Sally and Little Bill were in the kitchen talking in low voices. Easy said, "Hello, Bill," as calmly as he could, and waited. Little Bill thrust his head unbelievingly from the door, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"I stuck around," explained Easy. "Thought maybe I could be of some use." He walked toward the house as he spoke. When Sally appeared in the doorway he saw the color creep into her face, and then he looked away quickly. Reaching the kitchen stoop he paused.

"Bill," he said, "could you spare me a minute?"

Little Bill came hobbling down the steps. Sally had gone back into the kitchen.

"How is your uncle?" asked Easy, in an anxious voice.

"We don't know." Little Bill was very grave. "Doc Gibbon says maybe he'll make it, maybe he won't. He told us what to do for him."

"Why didn't he stay?"

Little Bill turned his eyes from the man's face. "We ain't got no money," he said. "We still owe Doc for the time he worked on my leg."

"Umm," said Easy. His hand slipped down and felt the bulge of money belt around his waist. There was more than three thousand dollars in that belt. He stared at Little Bill silently.

"Come on," the boy said awkwardly. "We're goin' to have some breakfast, I reckon. They ate before they left an' there ain't much left."

"I got an idea we can cure that," said Easy. "Let's go."

SALLY had nothing to say. When she looked at Easy her eyes held an inquiry, one that he could not answer. Finally Little Bill demanded to know why he had come back, and Easy explained that he had not wanted to take Bill's pet horse, and, too, he thought that Warrior's presence, if it were detected, might require some explanation. Little Bill accepted that, but Sally's eyes told that she did not. When he had eaten scantily of the food that Sally prepared, Easy went in to see McLean, both of them accompanying him.

McLean's face was pale and colorless, and his eyes were closed. He had regained consciousness briefly under Gibbon's ministrations, but had not been able to answer questions. The sheriff had promised to send a man back to stay with them, so Sally said. Easy thought it over.

"Bill," he said finally, "could you go to town?"

Sally vetoed that. "It's thirty miles," she said. "There's a store at Canyon—

that's eight miles—and we trade there. But Bill can't go to Dockstader."

"Canyon will do," said Easy. "I'm plumb out of smokin', Bill. Could you take a wagon over an' get me some?"

Bill's eyes were wide with surprise. Easy pulled a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off a couple. "Better get some groceries, too. You an' me'll hitch up a team while your sister makes a list of chuck. Or wait—you're about tuckered out. You can go this afternoon after you've slept."

"We can't let you do that," Sally said. "You mustn't."

"You saved my life," said Easy. "Saved me a heap of trouble, anyhow."

"You brought in Uncle Wayne," the girl answered. "If there is anything owed, we owe it."

Easy disregarded Little Bill. He looked squarely at the girl, blue eyes intent on hers. "I meant that last night."

Under his direct gaze the girl flushed and lowered her eyes.

"Did you?" she said, her voice almost a whisper. "I wondered—"

"You wondered if I'd be back, but you knew I meant it, didn't you?" Easy's voice forced her to look up again. There was a long silence, then:

"Yes," Sally said softly.

Easy nodded decisively. "I hadn't meant to tell you until I was in shape to do it," he said regretfully. "I'm on the dodge an' wanted, but—well, things just break that way. Is there any reason now why Bill can't get my tobacco?"

He grinned.

Sally shook her head.

"I ain't a bit tired," said Little Bill. "If you'll help me catch a team—"

"You an' your sister will sleep awhile," directed Easy Marks. "I'll set by your uncle. Along this afternoon will be time enough for you to drive over to the store an' lay in a supply. How long will it take you?"

"I can use Brownie an' Buck an' make the round trip in three hours," said Little Bill. "But honest, I ain't sleepy. I couldn't go to sleep if I had to."

Easy knew the boy spoke the truth; Little Bill was working under tension. Easy glanced at the girl, and she nodded.

"Then you can go," said Easy.

Little Bill limped toward a bedroom. "Got to change my pants," he said.

"I'll make out a list," Sally announced, turning toward the table.

"Don't stint," Easy said, and followed Little Bill.

IT never entered Easy's head that Little Bill would not be all right. Little Bill was plenty old enough to project around by himself. Easy had been doing a man's work when he was as old as Bill. The tall fellow, following the boy into the bedroom, stopped at the door. Little Bill was peeling off his pants. When his thin legs were bare, Easy quietly stopped him.

"Who worked on your knee, kid?" he asked, his eyes fixed on a great scar growth behind the joint.

"Doc Gibbon," answered Bill, reaching for a clean pair of trousers. "Nicker fell with me an' broke my knee an' Doc had to take out a piece of bone. Why, Easy?"

Easy did not reply, but turned and went back into the living room. That scar was what made Little Bill limp; it held the leg crooked, like a curby hock.

Easy scowled.

Her list finished, Sally was chewing the end of her pencil, scanning the paper to see if she had overlooked anything, when Easy entered the room. Bill joined him soon after, and together they went to the corrals.

Easy used Nicker to run in a team, a pair of likely looking bays that Bill designated. Easy harnessed them and hooked them up to a buckboard. The kid could make more time with a light rig than he could with a wagon. Sally came out with

her list, and Little Bill stood by, waiting for directions.

"You get these," she ordered Bill. "Have Dennis load them for you."

She handed her brother the list.

Little Bill, about to climb into the buckboard, stopped short, wheeled, and went scrambling for the house. Returning, he carried the Sharps and a handful of brass shells, dully tipped with lead. "I like to forget her," Little Bill announced, putting the Sharps under the seat. "You can look for me back right away quick."

Easy passed out the money. "You needn't mention that I'm here, Bill."

Bill looked hurt. "What do you think I am?" he asked. "Loose-mouthed? I won't say a word."

Easy laughed and hoisted the boy into the seat. Little Bill drove the buckboard out of the yard, away from the corral. When he looked back he saw that the big man's arm was about his sister.

## CHAPTER III

### Bushwacker Bullets

BACK in the house, Easy spoke of Bill's leg. "There's no need of his bein' crippled," he told Sally. "It's that scar that binds him. There's a man in Denver that can fix that fine. We'll look into it, an' if that's a sample of Doc Gibbon's work we'd better get somebody else to look after your uncle."

"Doctor Gibbon is the only doctor there is for miles," answered the girl. "I'm afraid about Uncle Wayne, Easy."

"He's hurt bad," Easy agreed gravely. "Still, there's no use of worryin' about him. We've done what we can."

Together they went to the man on the couch. Wayne McLean lay just as he had before, but there was a faint touch of color on his cheeks, and his breath came more evenly. Easy put a hand on his forehead; it was hot to the touch, but damp.

"Not much fever," said Easy. "Sally, you go lie down awhile. I'll sit with your uncle."

"You were up all night," reminded Sally.

"But I'm big an' tough," Easy grinned. "If I'm goin' to look after you, you got to let me have my way."

The girl was close to him. "I—" she began. "I didn't think it would be this way, Easy. I thought that I would—"

"I know, honey," Easy interrupted. "We all have dreams. It's tough on you fallin' in love with a man that's on the dodge. With a man that can't step right out in the open. It's tough on me bein' that way, too. There are so many things I'd like to do— Well, we'll do 'em, too. I'll be square with the world pretty quick."

He broke off, musing for a moment, his arm tight about the girl. Then he grinned. "Funny," he said. "I never cared what the law or anybody thought of me before. See what fallin' in love does for a man?" Bending, he kissed Sally's eager lips.

Easy had his way. For all his nickname, there was something very definite about Mr. Marks. Sally went to her room and lay down, and he sat down beside Wayne McLean. There was not a thing that he could do for McLean. Gibbon had left some medicine to be taken if the man's fever rose, and had given Sally directions concerning the wound; but Gibbon had been pretty casual about it. Too casual, Easy thought. Still, in his thirty years Easy Marks had seen many a man hurt worse than Wayne McLean come out of the timber and into the clear.

"You saw the jasper that plugged you," murmured Easy to the man on the couch. "Likely you know him. He aimed to finish the job by havin' your horse drag you. That would make it look like you'd fouled a stirrup an' been dragged to death. Kind of a clever fella' an' mighty dirty. When you tell me who he is, I'm goin' to visit

him. You'll talk when you wake up, I guess."

Comfortable in the chair, Easy dozed. The sun was warm in the room and the chair was comfortable and he needed rest. At noon Sally came from her room, refreshed. She went into the kitchen and suddenly she heard a horse at the creek-crossing. Coming to warn Easy, she found him already on his feet, peering out of the window.

"Company," said Easy. "I'll just go into the kitchen." He retreated, and Sally, flustered, waited for the arrival of the man on the horse.

In the kitchen Easy heard the door open and close, and a gruff, familiar voice greeted Sally. "I just came to see how Wayne was," said the voice. "I'd been out last night, but I couldn't ride."

"Sit down, Mr. Hunt." Sally sounded as though she were frightened. "Won't you sit down?"

The chair creaked as Hunt sat on it. His gruff voice resumed. "Curly Canbee came in last night for Doc Gibbon. I'd had an accident that afternoon. I got out as soon as I could."

"It was awfully nice of you." Sally had regained some of her poise. "Are you sure you ought to be out, Mr. Hunt? Your arm in a sling and—"

"Got shot a little," Hunt grunted. "Man that done it might just as well have killed me, but he just took my shoulder. Not very hard at that."

SALLY made no reply, and the chair creaked again as Hunt settled himself more comfortably. "I came out to tell you not to worry, Sally." His voice was still gruff. "I've got a mortgage on your place and your cattle, but that's all right. I'll hold it till Wayne is on his feet again an' you can sell your yearlin's. Didn't want you stewin' about that while Wayne was sick."

Easy could hardly believe his ears. He moved nearer to the door to listen.

Hunt went on talking. "I've told Gibbon that I'd stand good for anything he done for Wayne, an' I've told him to get out here an' stay awhile. He's better off here than he is drinkin' liquor in Bert George's saloon. Has Wayne come to yet? Does he know who shot him?"

"No," Sally answered. "He was conscious a little while last night, but he couldn't talk. Some of the men who were here thought that maybe the man who shot you—"

"Bunk!" Hunt grunted. "That fellow wouldn't do a trick like that. And, anyhow, he wouldn't shoot to miss unless he wanted to. He didn't want me or he'd have collected my scalp."

Behind the door Easy grinned.

"I stopped at Oscar Hornblow's on my way out here an' told him to bring you a quarter of beef," Hunt continued. "He was butchin' a beef anyhow, so he'd just as well spare you a quarter."

"Thank you, Mr. Hunt," Sally said in a low voice. In the kitchen Easy loosened the .45 in case of eventualities, and stepped to the door.

The door squeaked a little, and Hunt half turned in the chair and froze. Easy, his face pleasant, stepped into the room.

"Good evenin'," he said.

For a moment Hunt did not speak. Sally had her hand at her lips. Hunt's eyes were wide, but there was no fright in them. "Come in to finish what you started?" snapped the man in the chair. "I've no gun. Couldn't use one if I had." Hunt's right arm was in a sling, and his coat trailed loosely on his right side.

Easy shook his head. "No," he announced. "I come in to talk to you. Seems like maybe I'd made a mistake."

"By not killin' me?" Hunt snapped. "You can fix that now. You'd better, too, because if I get out of here an' get to town, I'll—"

"You can ride to town when you want," interrupted Easy. "All I ask is that you listen to me first. You aimed to down me yesterday, didn't you?"

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"I did. Anybody that'll welsh on a poker hand—"

"Now wait," said Easy. "I discarded a king of clubs. When it turned up in yo're hand I spoke my piece an' you went for your iron."

"An' you beat me to it." Hunt's face was still scowling. "You say you discarded the king of clubs. I say I caught it on the draw."

"An' we could both be right," snapped Easy. "Who dealt that hand? Remember?"

"Les Douglas. If you're accusin' Douglas of cheatin' you might as well save yore breath. I started Les in the cow business. Right now he's partner with me in a bunch of steers at Oscar Hornblow's."

"An' the man sittin' next to Douglas gathered the discards an' bunched 'em," Easy continued imperturbably. "Steve Trenton, his name was. He works for Douglas, 'less I'm mistaken."

"Well?" rasped Hunt.

"Well—" said Easy.

"There is someone coming!" Sally exclaimed suddenly.

Easy's big .45 appeared in his hand.

"You sit quiet, Mr. Hunt. You and me are goin' to talk this out. I'll be in the kitchen. I don't need to tell you what I want, I reckon?"

"Yo're the man with the gun," said Hunt.

"Keep it in mind." Easy's voice was quiet. He slipped away toward the kitchen. As he half closed the door a rider arrived outside the house.

EASY kept his eye to the crack of the door. He could see Hunt, tense in the chair, and could see Sally's troubled face. Steps thumped on the porch, the front door opened, and a stockman, black hat pulled low on his forehead, stood there. A black hat. That fellow who had downed Wayne McLean wore a black hat. But then, everybody wore them. Hunt had a black hat and—

"Evenin', Miss Sally," said the man at the door. "Hello, Mr. Hunt. You beat me here."

"Good evening, Mr. Hornblow," Sally answered, striving to hold her voice level. Hunt grunted.

"Little Bill come past the place goin' to the store," said Hornblow. "I give him that quarter of beef to bring up, an' I come ahead to see if there was anythin' I could do. Has Wayne got to where he can talk?"

There was uneasiness in the man's tone. His eyes shifted from Sally to the man on the couch, and then on to Hunt. Easy caught the tenseness, but dared not move. But there was something about it he didn't like.

"Not yet," answered Sally. "He has been unconscious. He—"

She was staring at the wounded man. McLean's head moved slightly, and then Easy saw Hornblow snatch for his gun. He had it out before Easy could clear the kitchen doorway, but the two shots thundered at the same instant. Hornblow went back out the door as though blown by a sudden puff of wind. Sprinting across the room, Easy reached the man on the bed; McLean's eyes were open, and there was a hole in the plaster, just above his head. When Easy straightened he heard a horse galloping off. He ran to the door, stopped, half lifted his gun, and then lowered it. Hornblow was gone through the trees.

Returning to the couch, he holstered the Colt. Hunt was already bent over Wayne McLean, and Sally was hovering anxiously at the foot of the bed. McLean's eyes were open; he stared up at Easy and there was recognition in them.

"You did, didn't you?" said McLean weakly.

"Did what?" snapped Easy.

"Brought me in. I remember you—bending over me."

"You kind of grinned," said Easy.

"Listen, you know who it was that shot you?"

McLean closed his eyes and Easy looked at Sally. "Seems we need that liquor, honey," he said.

Sally hurried away, returning with the dusty bottle and a spoon. Hunt gave ground, and Easy, taking Hunt's place, lifted McLean's head and filled the spoon. The liquor slid down McLean's throat. Easy gave him another spoonful and then waited.

After a time McLean opened his eyes again. His voice was stronger. "That's warm," he said.

"You know who downed you?" Easy was leaning forward, face intent.

"Yes," said Wayne McLean. "It was Oscar."

Easy nodded. "He tried to finish the job just now. He saw you move your head, an' I guess he thought you were ready to talk. I don't see how I missed him."

"Oscar Hornblow!" said Hunt slowly. "I wouldn't have believed it. Why would Oscar—?"

"Because of the steers he's supposed to be runnin' for you." Wayne McLean's voice took on added vigor. "I caught him takin' a string of 'em over the malpai ridge. He knew I'd caught him, I guess."

Easy sat down on the arm of the chair, dangling the bottle and the spoon in his big fingers. "Didn't you say that you an' Douglas was pardners in a string of steers at Hornblow's, Mr. Hunt?" he drawled.

"We are, damn it!" snapped Hunt. "When Les finds out about this—how long ago did it happen, McLean? When did you see Oscar, I mean?"

"Yesterday," answered Wayne McLean painfully. "I meant to come in—to tell you, but Oscar got me too quick."

Hunt nodded decisively. "Les ain't found out about it," he said with satisfaction. "I been lettin' Les look after the range business this year. I've stayed pretty close to home."

Easy said nothing. He was remembering the conversation he had heard from the barn loft. There was a mighty big shock coming to Mr. Hunt when he found out just what kind of stripe Les Douglas had down his back.

HUNT got up, took a few short steps and returned to the side of the couch. "I won't forget it, McLean," he said. "In a way you got shot protectin' my property. You'll find that I'll pay you back."

"That's all well an' good," Easy drawled. "But there's me to think about. I hate to be selfish, but the reason I've lived this long is because I think about myself. What about me, Mr. Hunt?"

Hunt turned and stared at Easy. "You!" he snapped. "You can roll your trail. I'll give you a runnin' start out of the country. I'm givin' you the benefit of the doubt. You say you discarded a king and it turned up in my hand. I think you lie, but you brought McLean in an' you—"

Easy's face flushed, but he kept his temper. "Mighty nice of you," he drawled. "Here I am with a gun an' able bodied, an' you'll give me a runnin' start out of the country. You poor damn fool!" The restrained temper broke loose. Easy came to his feet.

"Last night," he snapped, "I was in the barn loft when the posse came. I heard your pardner, Douglas, talkin' to this Curly fella. Douglas sent him to town for a doctor. He'd never have done it if he'd known why McLean was shot. I'll bet you what you like that Douglas knows those steers are gone. I'll make another bet with you that he took that king an' slipped it to you on the draw. If you weren't so bullheaded I'd say that you knew he done it. That's what I think of you an' your pardner, Mr. Hunt."

Hunt, already on his feet, took a step toward Easy. "You—" he spluttered.

"Sit down!" snapped Easy.

Hunt sat down. He was a big man in the Dockstader country. He was not used

to being talked to like this, but he sat down. Easy turned and started toward the door.

"Easy!" Sally's call checked him. "Where are you going?" the girl demanded.

"Down to Hornblow's place."

The girl reached his side and caught his arm. "You can't go," she said. "I won't let you. There's Little Bill to think of. He hasn't come back."

"He ought to be in sight now," said Easy. "I'll look out."

Freeing himself from the girl, he stepped forward to the door. Instantly there was a shot from the trees along the creek. Easy reeled back, a long, red furrow across his cheek. "I reckon I won't look out," he said slowly. "Not out the front door, anyhow. That might be Hornblow; it might be somebody else."

Once more Sally had hold of him. She tried to stop him, but Easy pushed her away and made for the back of the house. He opened the kitchen door cautiously, got no response, and stepped out. Not until he was fully out on the porch did the shot come. Then, spitefully, from the barn a rifle cracked. Easy went down.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Thundering Sharps

SALLY screamed; she started out of the door toward the big man on the porch, but Hunt pulled her back. "You'll be killed!" he snapped, and then, raising his voice:

"Oscar! Oscar!"

There was no answer. Hunt went on: "I know about the steers, an I'll let that go. You can get out of the country; I'll see you're not followed. There's a girl in here an' a wounded man. I'm comin' out to get Marks. Remember, Oscar—"

"You'll get killed," said Easy Marks casually from the porch. "That ain't Oscar in the barn. That's yore friend Douglas. I can see him from here. Get the door open an' step back because I'm comin' in."

For a moment Hunt gaped at the man he had supposed to be dead. Then, sucking in his breath, he swung around, grabbed a broom, and used it to push open the screen door.

"Now," he grunted.

Easy did not even try to rise. He bunched himself, and with a sudden jerk rolled in through the door. From the barn shots followed him and lead came swishing in, a slug banging against a frying pan. Easy pulled over to the cabin wall, where heavy, square-hewn logs protected him. He grinned up at Hunt.

"Right through the leg," he said. "Knocked me windin'. There's two, three men in the barn, an' anyhow one in front. I wish you had a gun, Mr. Hunt. You'd use it left-handed."

"You said that was Douglas in the barn?" snapped Hunt. "I don't believe you."

"He stuck his face out when he shot," Easy said levelly. "A man in front, an' two out back. I ain't got time to argue about who they are. Sally, you'll have to give me a hand. We got to see if that fella in front has got any ideas. I wish that Little Bill hadn't taken that Sharps."

Sally, her face white, helped Easy to his feet, supporting him.

The living-room door was screened from the rear opening. Easy reached out a hand and pushed the kitchen door shut. That prevented any view of the kitchen from the barn. Hobbling, his arm over Sally's shoulder, he made for the door to the living-room. There he paused. Wayne McLean was trying to get up from the couch.

"Get him back, Sally," ordered Easy. "Don't bother with me right now."

Sally released him and, catching the door casing, Easy managed to stay on his feet. He knew that the bone in his left leg was broken, splintered by the rifle

slug. But he was grateful for the numbing effect of that shot, for right now there was no feeling in the leg.

Sally got Wayne McLean back on the couch. The effort had been too much for him, and now he lay limp, his eyes closed.

As he leaned against the casing, Easy felt an arm steady him, and, turning, he saw it was Hunt. He grinned. They stood there without speaking until Sally returned from a bedroom with a holstered gun and a well-filled belt in her hands.

"Hunt," he directed, "you take that gun an' watch the front. They'll try from the back. That's where most of them are. I don't know how good a left-handed shot you are, but you'd better be good. I wish I'd took your left shoulder."

Hunt, edging past Easy, reached for the gun and belt. Sally swung it away. "I'll watch the front," she stated. "I can shoot."

"Can't have you taking any chances, honey," Easy told her. "Besides, I'm goin' to bargain to get you out of here. Give it to Mr. Hunt."

UNWILLINGLY the girl surrendered the weapon. Hunt took it, removed the gun from the holster, and held it awkwardly in his left hand. "There's too blame many windows," said Easy. "Window in every bedroom an' in the front an' in the kitchen. Just a matter of them getting up nerve an' then it'll be all over. But none of 'em want to be first." He laughed grimly.

Sally came to his side again. "Help me back in the kitchen, honey, where I can yell at 'em," he said.

With Sally's help he reached the window, then Easy bade her let him down. Reaching up with the .45, he shattered a square of glass and called to them in the barn.

"Douglas! Hey, Douglas!"

There was no answer for a moment, then Les Douglas called:

"What do you want, Marks?"

In the living-room Hunt heard the voice. His face darkened in a scowl and, forgetting his job, he moved toward the kitchen.

"I want to get Sally out of here," answered Easy. "How about letting her go?"

"An' let her talk?" Douglas' voice rose with a question. "Not much!"

"She won't talk!" Easy promised.

"I know she won't!" assured Douglas.

Sally shook Easy's shoulder. "I won't go," she said fiercely.

Easy was frowning. Finally he looked up at the girl. "I reckon you won't, Sally," he said.

Hunt had come into the kitchen. Unable to restrain himself, he shouted his anger: "Damn you, Douglas! Damn you! I'll—"

"Get back to that front room!" ordered Easy.

Hunt sprinted for the front room, and a moment later Easy heard him drop to the floor below the window. Then Hunt's Colt spoke twice, and the man swore.

"Damn a left arm. Damn you, Marks! Why'd you have to go and hit my right shoulder?"

Easy chuckled. "Because I was aimin' at it, I reckon," he answered. "Did you come close?"

"It was Hornblow!" raged Hunt. "Walkin' right out of the trees. I missed him both times."

Easy raised himself and peered over the edge of the broken window. Instantly there was a shot from the barn, he dropped back.

Sally, beside him, was trying to bare his leg. The girl's fingers trembled, and he bent over to help her. With his knife he slit the blue denim of his levis. There was not much that could be done about the wound save to bandage it and check the bleeding. The leg was beginning to burn now, but Easy managed to control himself while Sally wound some cloths in place.

"What do you reckon they aim to do?" Hunt asked from the front room.

"They aim to get up nerve enough for one of 'em to come in," answered Easy. "None of 'em want to be first."

"But what—"

"How did you ever get any place in the cow business?" There was mild curiosity in Easy's voice. "They figure that with us wiped out they'll go to town. I took a shot at you, didn't I?"

"Yes, but—"

"When the sheriff gets here you an' me an' Sally'll be dead. So will McLean. I'll have killed you an' you'll have killed me, or else they'll have done it, dependin' on what story they want to tell. It will be a case of a cornered outlaw, which is me, bein' run to the ground. Couldn't you cook up a nice tale if you was in their place? And won't Douglas have a good time sellin' all your cattle? You an' him got a pardnership agreement, I reckon?"

"On the steers at Hornblow's."

"Easy enough to stretch a paper like that. I wish I could walk. I'd get Sally out of here."

Les Douglas called from the barn: "Marks! Marks! I want to talk to you."

"I'm right here," Easy shouted.

"We'll let you go if you kill Hunt. Shove him out the door an' we'll let you an' the girl go."

"How about McLean?" called Easy.

"Leave him where he is," answered Douglas. "We'll take care of him. Just put Hunt out the door an' we'll do the rest."

JABE HUNT was in the door between the living-room and the kitchen. He spoke now, voice calm. "Take him up on that, Marks."

Easy grinned. "Like hell," he said. "He'd drop you, an' then when me an' Sally come out we'd get the rest of what was in his gun. Think he'd let us get away? Not much!"

"Then what are you goin' to do?" demanded Hunt.

"I'd like to get Sally out a bedroom window," answered Easy. "There ain't but three of 'em. They can't watch the world. If we could get 'em to lookin' at somethin' she could get away. Think you could find Little Bill, honey?"

"I'm not going."

"If I could just walk," groaned Easy, "I could go out the door an' make 'em think they had to tend to me."

"I can walk!" snapped Hunt.

Easy looked at the square, red-faced man. "So you can," he said, and suddenly grinned.

"You an' me an' McLean are done, Mr. Hunt. We're all finished. But with you're legs an' my arms— How'd the back door suit you? There's two of 'em out back. Mebbe we could manage to get both of 'em."

Hunt came toward the big man, a grim smile on his face. "What are you going to do?" demanded Sally.

"Listen, honey," commanded Easy, "you go into the bedroom. The one that's next the bluff where the cottonwood comes closest to the house. You get a window up. Mr. Hunt and I are goin' out to see his pardner. When you're ready you say so an' we'll make our visit. You get out that window an' to the trees. Keep goin'. You'll likely find Little Bill between here an' the store. You an' Bill get back to the store an' send word to the sheriff what's happened."

"But I can't leave you," Sally wailed. "I can't, Easy."

"Honey, we're right against it," said Easy. "Mebbe we can hold 'em off. Mebbe we can make a fight of it. You go get help, huh?"

Then after a pause he said: "It's our only chance, Sally. Give me a kiss and make for the window."

The girl bent down. Her eyes were wet as she kissed the big man who smiled up at her so steadily. "I'll get help," she promised. "I'll get someone . . ."

"That's the girl," he said. "Now you're talkin'. You make it to the window an' call when you're ready."

Sally, hesitating a moment, turned and left the kitchen. They could hear her as she crossed the living-room and paused by Wayne McLean's bed.

"You think she's got a chance?" asked Hunt, low-voiced.

"You think we got a chance out back?" Easy answered. "She'll maybe get to the trees an' away. I'm betting on that. We'll go out now, pretty soon. Just when she yells. Help me up."

Hunt bent down and lifted Easy to his feet.

"Let's get set as good as we can," said Easy. "We want to go as fast as we can. You'll need all you got to hold me. Let me have that other gun."

Hunt passed over the weapon. Easy took it in his left hand. "It's full," Hunt said. "I reloaded. Now get yo're left arm over my shoulder. Go easy! That shoulder's sore, thanks to you."

"Don't let that fret you," Easy answered. "It won't be sore long. I'm blame glad to see Little Bill isn't here. If Sally can get to him an' the team— Well, let's go!"

With Hunt holding Easy up, the two went to the door and paused, waiting for the call from Sally.

"We're all set, Sally," Easy called. "Whenever you say the word— What's that?"

From somewhere in front of the cabin came the heavy roll of a shot. From the sound it was not close, but beyond the creek and the cottonwoods.

THE men stood poised, ready to go out through the door. In the bedroom Sally stopped, her leg over the window ledge. She had decided to slip out without a word to Easy. Perhaps she could get away; perhaps she could find Little

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Bill and go for help. But Easy was not going out that back door, not going out to certain death.

Again came the heavy, rolling report. Easy looked down into Hunt's upturned face. Easy's eyes lost their grim look and his lips curved a trifle. "That," said Easy, "will be Little Bill. I hope that kid can shoot!"

In the barn Les Douglas and Curly Canbee heard those heavy shots and looked at each other. There was anxiety in Curly's eyes. "What do you reckon?" he asked.

Les Douglas shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "That wasn't Oscar's .38-.55. It sounded like—"

Breaking his sentence, he moved from the stall window he occupied and went to the door. At the edge of the door he paused and called:

"Oscar! Oscar!"

No answer came. Les Douglas could see the creek from the barn door. He risked a hasty look. The trees stood yellow along the creek, and there was no movement at all. Then in a treetop a magpie flitted from one branch to another, and at last fluttered down.

"Oscar!" called Les Douglas. "Oscar!"

In the kitchen Easy Marks spoke again to Jabe Hunt. "They seem kind of worried about Oscar," he drawled. "You might let me down an' go out front to see if Oscar's present."

Hunt lowered the big man. Wordlessly, Easy passed over the spare gun. Holding it in his left hand, Hunt walked to the front room. In the adjoining bedroom Sally withdrew her leg from the window. She, too, had heard the heavy thunder of a Sharps and the voice from the barn. On the couch Wayne McLean opened his eyes, and in the kitchen Easy Marks reached up and turned the door-knob. This was a break. Pretty soon somebody in the barn would make a try for the front of the house.

Out by the creek Oscar Hornblow lay still and dead.

## CHAPTER V

### Settled Scores

LITTLE BILL had done his errands at the store. He had given the list of groceries to old Sam Bottom and let Sam fill the order.

"Who's goin' to pay for this, Bill?" demanded Old Sam, looking over his glasses. "I heard about your uncle gettin' shot. You run up a big bill with me now an'—"

"I'm payin'," said Little Bill, drawing bills from his pocket. "You put up them groceries an' don't forget some tobacco." He whistled casually to himself as the grumbling Sam, eyes on the bills, obeyed.

Sam put the groceries in the wagon. Little Bill paid, and then, swaggering as best his crippled leg would permit him, limped out. He clucked to the bay team.

The buckboard rolled right along on the way home. Two miles below the house he passed Oscar Hornblow's. Oscar was at the gate, and, when he called, Little Bill pulled in his team.

"I got a quarter of beef for you, Bill," said Oscar. "Take it up home for me, will you?"

"Sure," said Little Bill. "Thanks."

"Come in an' I'll load it on." Oscar opened the gate and Little Bill drove in. He loafed on the wagon seat while Oscar brought up a fresh hind-quarter and put it on a gunnysack in the back. With that done, Oscar sauntered up to the buckboard.

"How's things, Bill?" Oscar asked. "How's—?" Oscar's big hands grappled Little Bill, snatched him down from the seat. The boy fought valiantly, but another man, Steve Trenton, came up from behind him suddenly and seized his good leg. Together the men carried Bill into the house.

They dumped the boy on the floor. Oscar bent down and slapped him viciously. "Kick me, will you? Keep him here, Steve. I'm goin' up to Wilkinses. I didn't finish McLean yesterday."

"Hunt's up there," warned Steve.

"Yeah. I'd just as soon take care of him, too. Les wants him out of the way. We got a sale right now for these steers."

Steve Trenton shrugged. "Go on," he said. "I'll watch the kid." Hornblow went out, and Trenton sat down on a box and looked at Little Bill. After a while he began to roll a cigarette.

"I'd hate to kill you, kid," he said slowly. "I never killed a kid before."

Little Bill was silent.

It seemed hours later when the boy heard the sound of horses coming along the road. Trenton opened the door, looked out cautiously, and then stepped into the yard. Little Bill strained to hear what was said.

"Where's Oscar, Steve?"

"He's gone to Wilkins', Les. He's afraid McLean's come to and spoke his piece."

"Then it was Oscar that downed McLean?"

"Yeah."

"Clumsy damn fool! Why didn't he finish it?"

"He tried, I reckon. I got the Wilkins kid inside."

There was silence for a moment. Then Les Douglas said: "Curly, you an' me are due at Wilkins'. You, Steve, finish that kid and bring him with you when you come. Come on, Curly."

Little Bill heard the horses pound away. He heard Trenton turn and take a hesitant step toward the house.

Little Bill scrambled to his feet and searched the room with his eyes. He found the poker and stationed himself beside the door. Trenton, nerving himself for his job, moved again, striding toward the house now. The door banged open. Trenton came through, his eyes fixed on the corner where Little Bill had been. Then as he started to turn a piece of half-inch steel came crashing down! Little Bill swung the poker twice more to make sure. He was excited, but that did not spoil his aim. Steve Trenton lay on the floor.

When Little Bill hobbled out, Les Douglas and Curly Canbee were out of sight. The buckboard still stood in the yard, and Little Bill clambered awkwardly to the seat, gathering the lines. He sent the bay team dashing down the drive, and as they swept around the sharp curve the wheels screamed.

LITTLE BILL did not keep that wild pace all the way home. He knew he could not drive into the yard. He knew that Les Douglas and Curly and Oscar would have reached home first. A quarter of a mile down the road from the house he could see the yellow trees along the creek, and Little Bill stopped and climbed out. He loaded the Sharps and then, limping, using what he could for concealment, the boy went along toward home. As he traveled he heard shots, and gripped the Sharps more firmly.

On a little rise, a hundred yards from the creek, Bill stopped. There was a man in the trees; Bill could see him. The man was watching the house. That was Oscar Hornblow. Little Bill lay down. Carefully he raised the tang sight on the Sharps and peeped through it. He was breathing hard, and the sights would not center. Then, holding his breath, he squeezed. The Sharps bellowed and kicked. In the trees Oscar Hornblow turned quickly.

"Dang it. Missed!"

The greasy breech of the Sharps slid open. Another long, dark-tipped shell went into the smoking chamber. Again Little Bill peered through the receiver sight, and once again he fired. In the trees Oscar Hornblow dropped his rifle and then lay down.

Back in the barn Les Douglas looked at Curly. "Go see what happened to Oscar," he ordered curtly.

"Go yourself!" snapped Curly. "Think I want to walk out an' make a target?"

Douglas' eyes narrowed. "You get movin'!" he commanded. "I'll cover you. You can go out the back an' slide around."

"Show me," invited Curly. "Come along an' show me how."

"You wouldn't argue, would you, gents?" drawled a voice from the door.

Les Douglas turned. Easy Marks, a broom held crutch-like under his arm, stood in the doorway. Les Douglas half lifted his hand. Curly yelped and dodged behind a stall. Douglas was falling as Curly reached that partial shelter.

But half-inch planks are no protection against the big slugs of a .45. Easy Marks reached through that thin plank partition, reached with lead. Powder smoke strung its thin cloud up and down the barn alley. The broom slipped on the floor. Easy went down. There, half-sitting, he could see under the smoke, see a man that lay still; and protruding from behind the stall a booted foot that was limp and that turned slowly as its owner settled. Easy was staring at the foot when Jabe Hunt came running to the barn door.

"I think it's all right to come in," drawled Easy, over his shoulder.

Jabe Hunt came into the barn. He walked gingerly past Easy and looked at the damage that Easy's Colt had done. When he turned to look at the man on the ground, Easy was occupied. Sally was kneeling beside him.

It took both the man and the girl to get Easy back to the house.

"We'll get that leg fixed up right away," said Burnside, and this time there was no coldness in his voice.

With Easy on the bed, his legs stretched out and made as comfortable as possible, Burnside left the house with Hunt. They went to the barn and to the creek, and in each place they left things undisturbed.

"What are you goin' to do with Marks, Jabe? Goin' to prosecute him?"

"No, I ain't!" Hunt flared up at the question. "I'm goin' to try to get him to stay here an' handle cattle for me."

The sheriff made no reply to that, and the two walked back to the house together. "How come you're back here?" asked Hunt as they walked.

"Come back to see if Wayne had talked any yet," Burnside answered. "On the way over we heard some shots, an' then we saw the kid's buckboard."

The two went to the gate and stood waiting as Burnside's deputy brought the buckboard across the creek and pulled up before the house.

"No luck," said Bartel. "Trenton had pulled out."

"I thought so," Burnside grunted. "Drive around to the back."

Bartel nodded and swung the team. The buckboard wheeled toward the back of the house, and Hunt, with the sheriff beside him, mounted the front steps. Just on the porch Hunt paused. "Well, what about Marks?" he challenged.

Burnside shrugged. "If you can forget it, I can," he said.

Inside the house the two paused once more. On the couch Wayne McLean again lay with his eyes closed. It was touch and go with Wayne McLean, and would continue to be for some time.

Over in a corner of the room, just where he had stood the big Sharps, was Little Bill. He lay right where he had sunk down, a huddled heap of a kid, but one hand was still touching the Sharps. Burnside picked him up and, carrying him across the room, deposited him in the big chair.

While the sheriff attended to Little Bill, Hunt had stopped beside a bedroom door and stood looking in. Burnside joined him.

In the bedroom Easy Marks lay on the bed, and kneeling beside Easy was Sally, one arm thrown across his chest. Her face was pillowed on the comfort, and the two men in the doorway could see that her eyes were closed. Easy's big left hand rested on the girl's hair. He made no sound, no movement, and after a pause the two men in the door turned and noiselessly departed.

THE END

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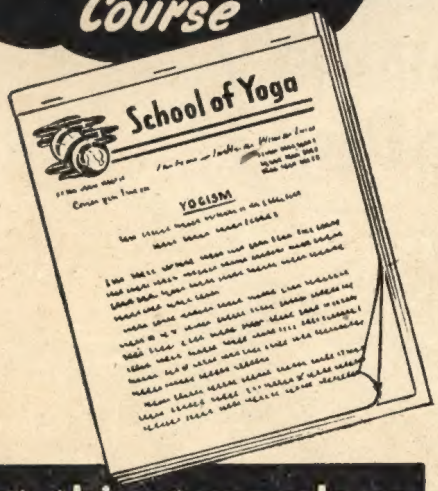


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Sceptical? So were others before they dared to read this exciting document. Then they discovered the Yogism secret of Self-faith and personal achievement. Famous men and women in all walks of life now use this formula. Famous magazines like *Health for All*, *New Health*, *Health and Strength*, *Health and Efficiency*, *Weightlifter and Bodybuilder*, *Sport*, *Weekly Sporting Review*, etc., acclaim it.

### Learn these Success Secrets

**DEEP RELAXATION**

Soothes away all nervous fears and tensions

**DEEP CONTRACTION**

A few easy, luxurious and non-repetitive stretches make your body trim and strong

**DYNAMIC BREATHING**

Revitalises and rejuvenates your whole system, flooding your body with new INTERNAL strength

**DYNAMIC CONCENTRATION**

Enables you to pin-point your mind and successfully carry out any task, however strenuous.

Mass-Observation examined no fewer than *one thousand* reports from people who applied this Lesson. Result—overwhelming proof that its guidance works. "Greater physical fitness and mental control are the outstanding *immediate* benefits", declares this independent tribunal, before listing other advantages.

Because Yogism is a down-to-earth, practical system, it will help you solve your present problems. Learn its success secrets, which remain constant whatever your age or circumstances. How to live as you have never lived before—sure, poised, confident. How to develop day-long energy. How to deal with things calmly, be admired, forge ahead.

This wonderful Lesson will blow sky-high many preconceived ideas. Accept its challenge! Let it work for you! Claim the full abundant life which is your birthright. Send for this revealing free Lesson to-day—NOW! Write to The School of Yoga, Dept. 41/5, New Malden, Surrey.

Send me my FREE TRIAL LESSON, absolutely without obligation, in plain sealed envelope. (*BLOCK letters, please*)

Name .....
(*Mr./Mrs./Miss*)

Address .....

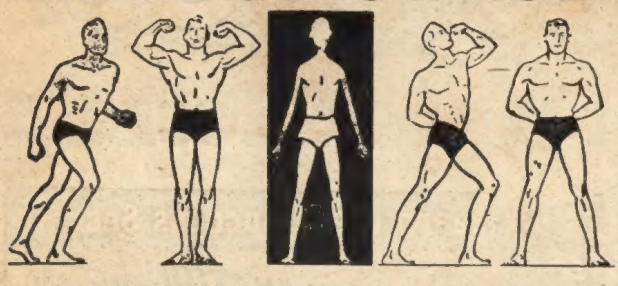
.....

Please enclose 5d. stamps return postage.

**School of Yoga**
Dept. 41/5
NEW MALDEN, SURREY

**YOUR TICKET TO SUCCESS. USE IT *NOW!***

# Are You Satisfied with YOUR BODY?



## Let Me PROVE I Can Make You a NEW MAN in Only 15 Minutes a Day!

**HOW do YOU look stripped—in locker-room or gym? Skinny, scrawny, sparrow-chested, self-conscious, HALF ALIVE?**

How do you feel when people notice your physique? Can you stand their gaze? If you're not satisfied with your present physical development, let me PROVE I can make you a New Man—in only 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home. I'll give you biceps like iron and a fine, deep chest. I'll broaden your shoulders, add ridges of solid muscle to your stomach, fill out your arms and legs. If you are fat and flabby, I'll streamline you into a picture of radiant manhood.

### What "Dynamic-Tension" Can do

How? **"Dynamic-Tension!"** That's the secret that changed me from a flat-chested 7-stone weakling into the red-blooded HE-MAN that I am to-day. That's how I'm turning thousands of fellows like yourself into New Men —with husky, handsome body and tireless endurance. I can do the same for you. Let me PROVE it!

**"Dynamic-Tension"** is a PRACTICAL and NATURAL method. You use no apparatus. My method actually is FUN! In only 15 minutes a day, you will actually see your muscles increase into powerful bulges of brawn and strength. You'll enjoy new stamina, a glad-to-be-alive feeling. Before you know it, you'll have a rugged, handsome body, a rough-and-ready ambition surging out of you that the world can't lick. I'll show you how it really feels to LIVE!

Charles Atlas

*An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner and holder of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."*

### SEND FOR FREE BOOK

All I ask is that you post the coupon NOW for my illustrated FREE book **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It shows actual photos of pupils I've changed from weaklings into remarkable specimens of manhood. If you want a body that men respect and women admire, then get this coupon into the post as fast as you can. Address me:

**CHARLES ATLAS,**
**(Dept. 147/S) 2 Dean St., London, W.1.**

**CHARLES ATLAS** (Dept. 147/S) 2 Dean Street, London, W.1.

I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic-Tension*" will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book "Everlasting Health and Strength," and details of your amazing 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER.

Name .....

*(Please print or write clearly.)*

Address .....

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